

Anishinaabe Philosophy: An Introduction
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This paper present, in a basic way, Anishinaabe[1] cultural and spiritual ethical codes. Consequently, I will discuss some of the foundational tenets of Anishinaabe philosophy and their role in Anishinaabe life. The Introduction, as a way of setting the context of this paper, discusses an Anishinaabe auto-history that strives to give the reader a glimpse of the world from an Anishinaabe perspective. The section Mother Earth and Cultural Codes explains the relationship of the Anishinaabe to the Earth and how this relationship forms the basis of some Anishinaabe cultural codes.

The sections Creator and Spiritual Codes and Teachings discuss the role of Creation, the Creator and Teachings in the formation of Anishinaabe spiritual codes and how this influences an Anishinaabe person's life. The final section on The Sacred Circle will deal with the place of the Anishinaabe in this Westernised society as well as with general differences between Anishinaabe and non-Native worldviews.

Introduction

To better understand Anishinaabe cultural codes it is necessary to set out the historical context within which these codes find themselves. Anishinaabe history, from an Anishinaabe perspective is not that history usually taught within the context of Western acquisition. Anishinaabe autohistory (self-history) is an ethical approach and it is based on two premises. The first is that, in the way Europeans appropriated Indigenous territory, the cultural values of the Anishinaabe influenced the formation of the character of the Euro-American. Consequently, European values did not modify the cultural codes of the Anishinaabe, since the Anishinaabe never left their natural milieu (Pirsig: 1991).

It may seem that many, if not all, the ways of the Anishinaabe were lost or destroyed in the ever increasing acquisition of land and home by Euro-Americans, and this is why I say 'cultural codes' when speaking of that thing that has remained after five hundred years of contact. I am well aware that this is a subtle point, but nevertheless it is evident once the layers of western influence are brushed away. Once this bit of house cleaning is accomplished we are left with the realisation that for all intents and purposes the Anishinaabe have overcome the never-ending offensive of western ways. Native peoples may live in back-splits with a car in the driveway and a VCR in the living room, and some of us may never have lived on a reserve or spoken our ancestral language, but these are only the outer appearances of a people. Within, we are nevertheless Anishinaabe.

The second premise in this ethical approach to Anishinaabe autohistory is that history (that is western history) still has not always understood that the study of the persistence of the essential values of the Anishinaabe, (with the help of these people themselves), is more important than the analyses often made of cultural transformation and/or destruction, as interesting as this may be academically but of little importance socially. (Sioui: 1989)

I admit straightaway that from the point of view of an Anishinaabe person, the persistence of essential values or codes is more important than change, and that, from the point of view of the dominant culture, the interest has always been in attempting to support the myth of the disappearance of Native peoples. But this is only a difference of perspective, and as such culturally sensitive. This cultural sensitivity, for the Anishinaabe, is in part defined by the cultural codes that they follow and it goes without saying that this cultural code is constant.

If we accept the two premises above, we can appreciate how much, on an historical,

cultural and social level, it is essential to know who the Anishinaabe are in order to understand their worldview and philosophical priorities.

Mother Earth and Cultural Codes

An underlying truth for the Anishinaabe is the inherent relationship, and belief in a relationship, with Mother Earth. The Anishinaabe are physically and spiritually bound in this relationship, and this relationship defines each person as child of this Mother.

Mother Earth is the underlying constant. The Mother unfolds beneath our feet as the ground on which we stand. Without the Mother there would be no life and no reason to live. This may seem mystical in context, but mystical or not it is the very truth by which we exist. It would seem that all life, humans included, has at one time or another felt a tie to the Mother. The one fact that seems to distinguish the Anishinaabe from those who live in a Western Euro-American way is that the Anishinaabe understand that the umbilical cord was never cut. Like a foetus in its mother, we are constantly drawing nutrition and life from our Mother. We cannot go anywhere without her, and even in our most far reaching voyages we are dependent on the life our mother provides for us; ask any astronaut.

So what is it about the Earth Mother that permeates Anishinaabe philosophies? In a word: circularity. We are witnesses to the circularity of the seasons, of life and death and life again, to the cycles that drive our very existence. The Circle of Life[2], the inter-connectivity of all Beings, is the primordial worldview and it is the very essence of Anishinaabe-ness as well as the foundation of Anishinaabe cultural and spiritual codes.

As we have seen, the 'cultural code' that binds us, like the cultural umbilical cords that are our respective cultures, is the Circle of Life as taught by Mother Earth. We are aware of this truth and it is in this truth that we again are witness to the constant context of Anishinaabe life. Rémi Savard, in his *Destins D'Amérique* (The Destiny of America) states that: the genuine American dimension, to which present day Indigenous peoples urge us towards, is neither English, neither French, neither Indian, neither Inuit; it is found in the Indigenous notion of the Great Circle, in accordance with which the obsessive respect of the specificity of each link becomes the indispensable condition in maintaining the whole. We no longer have any choice; it is of this America that we must seriously reflect upon in order to finally disembark. (Savard: 1979, 15 (lib. trans.))

As an example of a cultural code, the Anishinaabe code of family and community is one that has an unbroken connection to pre-contact. In the day to day reality of the past five hundred years it would seem that Anishinaabe identity has lost this truth, but again it is only a question of digging a little to find its constancy. The nuclear family has become the norm in this present social order and in many cases Native families live this way, but the mention of a person's Clan removes all doubt that the family and community code has been lost. Granted there are many Native people who no longer know their Clan, but the Clan concept, this one cultural code, still exists.

We are taught that Clans came about when the animals decided to adopt the Anishinaabe because of the difficulties we were experiencing when we first arrived on Earth. At seasonal ceremonies, Clan affiliation is of paramount importance for the functioning of ritual. All people present at the ceremonies are constantly reminded to find their Clan, through family research or even through adoption, so that they can find their place in the culture as well as in the world at large. Clan allows a person to find his or her place in the Circle of Life.

Creator and Spiritual Codes

Spirituality is the beginning of any attempt to understand Anishinaabe worldview, but it is also spirituality that is found when we finish digging for the truth. Spirituality is the underlying truth and without it the cultural codes would have been destroyed long ago.

The spiritual code that connects and unifies Anishinaabe perspective concerning life and meaning is at the very centre of Anishinaabe philosophy. The beginning for the Anishinaabe is found in Creation. This reality is not born of some random ordering of cosmic dust, but rather the expression of a Creator's thought. This is the underlying spiritual code that maintains and gives meaning to how and where we live.

What makes up the singular force of Anishinaabe philosophy is the capacity of all Anishinaabe Nations to agree on the idea of the unity and dignity of all Beings. The Anishinaabe person, when s/he prays, addresses her/his salutations to the universe. This allows her/him to recognise her/his place in Creation. We are sitting (when we are assembled) with the Great Circle of universal life. We are all equal, life is all equal.

Teachings

The one unending and unchanging reality of Anishinaabe philosophy is the place and importance of Teachings. As a mainly oral culture (with some exceptions), Anishinaabe philosophy has placed all its merit on the truth found in Teachings. James Dumont, an Ojibwe scholar stresses that,

If we try to understand and sensibly appreciate Native [Teachings] we must be willing, first of all, to accept that there is involved here a very special way of 'seeing the world'. Secondly, and a necessary further step, we must make an attempt to 'participate' in this way of seeing' (Miller et al.: 1992, 75)

Consequently, we must understand the "comprehensive, total viewing of the world and [how it] is essential for a harmony and balance amongst all of Creation" (Miller et al.: 1992, 75).

If this is the case, than any interpretation of Anishinaabe Teachings must include a comprehensive understanding of the people themselves. Teachings not only influenced personality, society, religion, action and ethics, they also set out the proper context for a person to live in. Teachings give life meaning. Thus the Creation Teachings, from the Creation of the First Man, his going about the world and naming all that is, his life with his Grandmother, and the origin of the first family, to the story of the great flood and the Creation of the New World, holds a prescription for a person's daily life. Without these Teachings s how would a person know how to be a good person? As such, Anishinaabe Teachings are oral reference libraries that account for stories, legends, prophesies, ceremonies, songs, dance, language and the custom of the people. Moreover, the Elder, responsible for this oral library, is as much the librarian as the library of this knowledge. The Teachings are as alive as the person hearing them or telling them. They exist in a dynamic form, changing as life changes. Its is for this reason that Teachings are important, and it is for the same reason that we must listen to their voices.

The Sacred Circle

In everyday life, our will and desire for western material things can separate us from the inter-connectivity of the Sacred Circle. As we try to balance the reality of spirituality and our back-splits and VCR's there are times that we forget (at times conveniently) that we are not separate and remote in this existence. We forget that we are forever linked to others (both human and non-human persons[3]) in the world, and in the end to Creation itself.

Generally, there is a fairly evident division between Western and Anishinaabe conceptions of existence. Joseph Couture, a Plains Cree Medicine Man and Pipe Carrier explains that: In the West, classical existentialism stresses the utter validity of subjectivity, i.e., of the feeling, reflective subject who has the freedom to make choices, and to determine thus his/her life. Therefore, what one does is of keystone importance. The doing that characterizes the Native Way is a doing that concerns itself with being and becoming a unique person, one fully responsible for one's own life and actions within family and community. Finding one's path

and following it is a characteristic Native enterprise which leads to or makes for the attainment of inner and outer balance. This is a marked contrast with general Western doing which tends and strains towards having, objectifying, manipulating, 'thingifying' every one and every thing it touches. (Couture, 1992)

Couture points out that the 'doing' of life for the Anishinaabe person is one of being and becoming good. It is a way of life that is both spiritual and ethical. Choice exists for both the Western and Anishinaabe person, but it seems to me that the Anishinaabe person has the added dimension of following an ideal path rather than creating the path itself. Choice is a tool of actualisation rather than of invention. Again, the main concern is of being good rather than simply doing good. This fact is found in a translation of the name of the people, "Anishinaabe": the Good Being.

Anishinaabe philosophy also stresses the interconnectivity of Creation rather than the connectivity of a physical and spiritual world. Western tradition, since the Greek philosopher Plato (428-348 B.C.E.), has attempted to divide reality into a rigid duality. Plato posited a two-world metaphysics of the intelligible and the sensible with a very clear division between the two. The French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) later refined this idea to a separation of mind or soul and body. The Anishinaabe do not separate the mind and body. There is an understanding of the person as a whole lived being. There is mention of the four aspects of the lived person; namely, mind, body, spirit and emotion, but they are not seen as independent, separate divisions.

Within the cycle of birth and death it is evident that everything that exists has a beginning and an end. For the Anishinaabe, the divinity of life is paramount. Nevertheless, the Anishinaabe are not simply animistic. It is not a simple matter of saying that all is alive; that there is no inanimate. Rather, it must be understood that all is animate potentially, and that this life can be actualised in various fashions, but always by way of choice-making. As such, I find myself part of a vast community called Creation, immediately connected to all its aspects. For non-human beings, the path of life unveils itself in a simple direct manner, but I must work harder at following the path. Humans are beings that have the tendency to wander about, unlike non-humans that are more directed due to their state of existence. Humans are considered the weakest being in the world. Each human needs a great deal of help in finding the potential of his/her life path, and even more help in learning to actualise it. We are not necessarily in tune with our intuitive abilities and, as such, struggle somewhat.

In Creation, one is never alone. The divine is everywhere. Everything received is a gift since at each level I am in a personal relationship with Creation. Everything $\frac{3}{4}$ all action, all thought, all emotions $\frac{3}{4}$ have a personal texture and import. Nevertheless, I am not anonymous in an impossibly crowded world such as we know today. I am unique: the only example of myself. My sense of uniqueness, my unique ability to choose and act, underlies my very existence. My moral agency gives me a sense of dignity and I express this in taking complete responsibility for my choices. The Creator sets out an ideal Path of Life for each being. It is my path in-so-far that I may or may not choose to actualise it as I live.

In the Anishinaabe life-way, I must be aware of all my relations, human and non-human, and as such there is a rich sense of community. I am never alone. Moreover, individual accountability and understanding are intimately interrelated since only I can understand: nobody else can make me find the truth within.

Ultimately, this all comes down to what James Dumont calls a special way of seeing the world whereby there must be a comprehensive, total viewing of the world. This special way of seeing the world involves the ability to 'see' the potential therein. The Anishinaabe have always understood that the place of humans in this world is only that of one type of Being among many others.

The creative power of existence always nurtures the life that is created. Ultimately, existence is totally dependent on Creation. This dependence on the divine power of Creation is fundamental and as such there is a general sense that nothing that exists can be taken for

granted. All is divine by the very nature of Creation. There is also the knowledge that the divine power of Creation can be trusted, and that all things are where they belong. This is evident in the knowledge that all things happen in their own way, for their own reasons. As such, Creation is meaningful and ordered.

The divinity and order of Creation makes every moment precious and there is a sense of gratitude and humility for this reality. Since all existence is divine, all existence has a direct link to Creator and Creation. The interconnectivity of all life, potential and actual, makes the world a safe and meaningful place where I am able to explore and ultimately fully actualise my identity.

As we have seen, Anishinaabe philosophy is centred on Creation and the Sacred Circle. All things are inter-connected, and as such, our place in Creation brings balance and belonging in the world. Nevertheless, since we interact with the world in a mainly physical way, it is very difficult to see the physical/spiritual unity of Creation. The Anishinaabe are a dream conscious people who understand that dreams and visions are doorways into the more expanded dimension of actual Creation. James Dumont explains that:

There seems to be a vital link, then, for the [Anishinaabe], between mythical times and the present. In fact, it might be said that mythical times become present when we approach the realm of the sacred through the dream of the vision quest. Perhaps this can be expressed as simultaneous realities. What we have called mythical time is eternally present, and it occurs simultaneously with our present. (Miller et al.: 1992, 78)

Since Creation is a complex of many aspects it is necessary to develop the proper senses to be able to 'perceive' it completely. The Anishinaabe use various ceremonial rituals (Fasting, Sweet Lodge, etc.) to expand their perception of reality.

The Sweat Lodge

We are taught that the Sweat Lodge is the closest that we can get to the Creator in this physical manifestation. The Sweat Lodge represents knowledge and understanding free of will and desire. It allows us to uncover the truth that everything is where it belongs.

For the Anishinaabe, the Sweat Lodge is a pivotal ceremony. To enter the Lodge is to literally re-enter the Mother's womb. Once inside we abandon the subjectivity and objectivity of our lives; we abandon the relationship of us and them, subject and object. When we lose ourselves in the contemplation of the infinite greatness of the universe and of Creation, by meditating on the time that is past and is to come, by seeing the innumerable worlds that the heavens at night actually bring before our eyes and thus have the immensity of Creation thrust upon our consciousness, only then do we feel ourselves dwindle to nothingness. As individuals, as lived entities, we feel ourselves pass away and vanish into nothingness like a drop in the ocean. We are united with Creation, in it and of it. We are not oppressed, but exalted by its infinity.

Once we rise above will and desire we rise above ourselves as pure subjects. Once Creation is no longer seen as some kind of differentiated substantiality but as unity, we are filled with the sense of the sublime; we are in a state of physical/spiritual balance.

It is important here to understand fully the meaning of unity. Creation is not a movement towards unity, but rather is unity in movement (i.e., more than the sum of the totality). To think that Creation can only be grasped by the senses, or conversely, that it can only be grasped by the mind, is to give either the sensible or the intellectual more importance than the other. Creation is harmony in seeming duality, it is the unity of Being rather than the unity of the intellectual and the sensible or of the objective and the subjective. This underlying harmony is what gives meaning to the perceived dualities of life. Nevertheless, any attempt to call Creation the synthesis of this or any duality is an attempt to do away with duality. Duality is a matter of fact. We find duality in all aspects of our lives, i.e., hot and cold, light and dark, etc. This duality is of the actual kind as experienced in life, and not the metaphysical duality

as expressed in Western philosophy. Ultimately Creation cannot be thought of as global or Creator oriented, as in a synthesis, since it is the harmony of all duality. In other words Creation is not simply a conglomeration of all that exist objectively (known and unknown) put together by a Creator, but it is the harmony that is found in both the total collection of all that is, and the individual beings themselves, including Creator. By this, I mean to say that each individual (human and non-human) is as much a representation of the whole of Creation as the whole of Creation is a representation of itself. This may all seem rather mystical from a Western perspective, but simply put, we are taught that we are each the physical/spiritual manifestation of the whole of Creation and that it is our responsibility and duty to live a good life so that Creation is maintained. Creation is, and as such all that is, is Creation. For the Anishinaabe this is the highest goal of a good life. When a person comes out of the Sweat Lodge, they are united in Creation, of it and as it, swallowed up by the infinity. Only then can a person truly say that they are alive and living in a good way.

Conclusion

We have seen that Creation is a dynamic process, unfolding and becoming, yet we live in a world seemingly made up of static constancy. The truth found at the centre of the Circle of Life is that we must constantly fight the static reality that we put so much faith in, since it is the self that is at the centre of the Circle of Life, one and the same with Creation. In our incomplete perception of the world, it seems that static quality allows for laws of nature and society, for instance, but even gravity has to give up its grip from time to time. Gravity may be a constant in the universe, but Creation looks at this static constant and replies to this challenge with a dynamic solution.

Look in the sky — everyday we can find a bird flying, showing us the way to fight static reality. The bird is dynamic in its reality, and the best part is that, that bird up there is not doing it to make a statement — birds fly!. One of the greatest human tragedies is that we are constantly allowing ourselves to believe that there is nothing that we can do about the seemingly static, unchanging and unchangeable world around us.

I have discussed many issues and points in this paper, and at times the expression of these ideas was mystical and esoteric in nature, nevertheless, these thoughts express some of the understanding I have gained from listening to the Elders and Traditional Teachers. These are not simple or easy concepts to grasp, nor are they meant to be. The Circle of Life that I spoke of has a centre, and at that centre I find myself. As the centre of this wheel I am the focus as well as the hub that holds all the aspects together. These reflections are relevant and true for me since they are some of the spokes that radiate from my centre.

I have been taught that there are seven directions in every instance of the present. There are the four cardinal directions, each with its own teachings, as well as above to Creator, and below to Mother Earth. But it is the seventh direction that is ultimately the most important. The seventh direction is the centre, and the centre is where I find myself. It is my responsibility to journey to the six directions, but it is my duty to return to the centre with the new teachings I have received in those directions. At the centre I must take those teachings received, and integrate them into my life as one being among many. I have been told that in doing this I will ultimately find the centre of the centre, that is, the underlying codes of a good life..

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Notes

[1]The Anishinaabe Peoples reach from the Atlantic coast in the East to the Rockies in the West and from what is now known as Northern Ontario and Quebec to North Carolina in the South and Northern California and Mexico in the South-west, with exception of the Hodenosaunee (Iroquois) territories south of the Great Lakes. The Anishinaabe language family is the largest in North America. It includes many Nations with a common history who speak a similar language with linguistic roots which can be traced back to the Atlantic Coast. "Anishinaabe" means "the good being, male of the species that came from nothing and was lowered down to the Earth". In central North America (Ontario, Manitoba, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota) the Anishinaabe are generally referred to as Ojibwe (variations: Ojibwa, Ojibway, Chippewa).

[2]This is also referred to as the Medicine Wheel.

[3] For the Anishinaabe the scope of what constitutes an animate being or person is much broader than what is understood in the West. It is normal to refer to a Teachings, a stone, an animal or a ceremonial Pipe for example, as a person in the same way that we usually refer to a human being as a person.

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