Recentering the Turn: Bringing Native Philosophy into Ontological Studies

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Introduction

The past few decades have seen a significant shift in the work of some anthropologists that has recentered research away from visible human behaviors and practices towards a cognitive focus centered on ontologies. While there are multiple definitions of "ontology," we define it as an understanding of reality and how that reality exists and is maintained (see Lawres 2017; Sanger 2021). So, to study ontologies is to study what people understand the building blocks of reality to be, how those building blocks fit together, and how these views are maintained to make sure that reality does not fall apart.

While less visible, ontologies have a reciprocal and constitutive relationship with more observable cultural structures and practices. For example, because ontologies provide an understanding of a lived world, cultural structures draw on this foundation to provide the etiquette, norms, and sociohistorical rules for interacting with that world, which act to reify both the culture and ontology from which they are drawn. Or, as philosopher James Feibleman (1951) refers to it, culture is a form of "applied ontology" because of this inherent relationship.

Anthropologists who focus on ontologies are part of a broader movement in the discipline known as the "Ontological Turn (OT)." There is no single, unified approach in the OT (see Alberti 2016 and Kohn 2015 for reviews), but it has had a strong influence on anthropological research by pushing anthropologists to think differently about their work and data, often causing them to think outside the bounds of Western-centric thought, especially in terms of how people relate to their worlds and the entities that dwell within them.

A positive aspect of OT that has not yet been fully realized, we argue, is that it can provide a means of decolonizing the discipline by incorporating more Indigenous voices, concepts, and ideas into anthropological discourse. Indeed, the OT has been critiqued by Indigenous researchers who point out it is dominated by European-based frameworks and when Indigenous views are expressed, they come through white, and often male, interlocutors (Todd 2016). The lack of direct engagement with Indigenous peoples is the most confounding aspect of the OT because at its core it is about taking Indigenous voices seriously when they describe worlds unlike our own (Graeber 2015; Henare et al. 2007). Some archaeologists have been successful in merging the OT with Indigenous voices (e.g., Fowles 2013, Zedeño 2008), often through direct and sustained personal relationships with local Indigenous communities, but these remain in the minority with most studies relegating Indigenous peoples as informants or subjects of study.

Another means of Indigenizing the OT that could be widely applied would be to shift our theoretical dependence from Western to Indigenous philosophers. Ontology is a term borrowed from philosophy, and anthropologists engaged in the OT typically rely heavily on Western philosophers, including Heidegger, Latour, and others. Such reliance then reframes Indigenous ways of understanding the world back into Western, colonial frameworks. While this practice may have been acceptable decades ago when there were very few Indigenous philosophers, this is no longer the case. The number of such writers, particularly Native American authors, has grown dramatically since the early 2000s. As two Euro-American archaeologists, we are acutely aware of the dangers of repackaging Indigenous knowledge in our own voices and thereby recreating the colonial project that we seek to dismantle. The goal of this article is to introduce a few aspects of Native Philosophy that speak directly to the goals of the OT and to urge readers to engage directly with these authors in order to bring Indigenous voices and frameworks into their work and research.

Native Philosophy and the Ontological Turn

Long a bastion of Euro-American thought, philosophy has grown to include diverse voices from around the world, including most recently, Indigenous peoples, particularly Native Americans. In the last few decades, the number of philosophical works written by Native Americans, including several that are applicable to the OT, has increased dramatically and continues to grow rapidly. It is not possible to detail all the potential applications of Native Philosophy, so here we focus on a few that tie directly to core topics in the OT that rely most heavily on Western philosophers. Our goal is to show that Native Philosophy provides direct discussions for these concepts in the hope they will be directly engaged with in lieu of continuing to rely solely on Western philosophers.

Non-human persons

The OT is connected to another larger philosophical move found throughout Anthropology–post-humanism. Posthumanism and the OT both posit that there are many ways of living and understanding the world (or some would say that there are, indeed, many worlds), including a large proportion that do not see humans as the primary agent of change, intentionality, or making meaning. As an example, Philippe Descola (2013[2005]) revives the classic anthropological trope of animism by reframing it as a type of ontology. In this ontological understanding, humans and animals share similar inner essences (or interiorities), with different outward physical bodies (or physicalities). These inner essences, he says, are what allow for relations between humans and animals to develop and be maintained over time, and they are what provide the basis for the sentience and agency that human and nonhuman persons share. In other words, it is the inner essence, rather than humanness, which is the basis for personhood. However, the dissimilarity in bodies hinders communication between species. Donning parts of an animal's body, whether it is the skin/hide, feathers, or teeth, brings about a metamorphosis into that species to aid in communication. In other words, to communicate with a bear, a person would have to put on a bear skin and transform into a bear to be understood. Descola's work is a good example of much of the current state of OT in that it relied heavily on local Indigenous communities, but was fundamentally structured by Western philosophical traditions, particularly Structuralism and Phenomenology.

Native Philosophers also often discuss the presence, character, and context associated with living in a world populated by numerous non-human agents, but unlike their Western counterparts, they are not describing some sort of theoretical possibility or a second-hand account but are reporting on their own empirical reality. Because they are describing real-world experiences, Native Philosophers provide a deeper context about the nature of non-human actors that is critical to better under-

stand local communities and individuals. At its core, virtually all Native Philosophers agree that the world is formed of a shared substance/power/essence that ties all things together and provides the potential for agency, intentionality, communication, consciousness, memory, and other capacities. Because these capacities are widely distributed, "personhood" is not limited to humans–nor is society or culture. While each Native group has its own distinct understanding of the broader social network around them, all view human societies as only a part of a larger web of relations that include non-human peoples. For many groups, non-human peoples form their own societies, replete with family units, ancestries, clans, moieties, and other social structures that echo human societies. Some social structures span human and non-human worlds (such as clans) and are a means by which personal relationships are formed. For example, the phrase "all my relations" is used among many Native communities in stories and prayers, and describes the world as filled with a wide range of entities, both human and non-human--all connected to each other. These relations are not seen as inherent. Rather, there is an aspect of performance involved that brings those relations into existence and maintains them over time (Norton-Smith 2010). Typically, this performance calls on the kinship, history, indebtedness, promises, or other ties that bind human and non-human peoples. Critically, these binds are highly localized, meaning they are between particular human and non-human peoples and have been built up over time.

Relational Ontologies

In addition to their shared focus on the potential for non-human agency, another critical crossover between OT and Native Philosophy is in terms of "relational ontologies": The reality of something emerges out of its place in a broader, often social, context. This is in contrast to a "material ontology," in which things have a distinct reality at their essence, and it is through this pre-existing reality that social contexts are formed. A key aspect of the OT is in applying relational ontologies to non-human things–particularly objects–as all material forms take on characteristics based on their place in a larger social network.

One of the seminal volumes of the OT, *Thinking Through Things* (Henare et al. 2007), is an excellent example of this argument. It provides ethnographic examples demonstrating how people develop different relationships with things and materials, and how those relationships play powerful roles in defining the things, the people, and the broader world. This ability to shape reality emerges from a sort of agency found within seemingly "inanimate" objects. The various authors in *Thinking Through Things*, as well as other key OT writings focused on human-object relations, rely heavily on Western Philosophers like Bruno Latour and Martin Heidegger who focus on the problematic division of subject and object and possibilities of dissolving that binary.

A rejection of the subject-objects division, and a radical understanding of relational ontologies define much, if not all, of Native Philosophy. For most Native Philosophers, relational ontologies are deeply intertwined with place, landscape, and spatial context. Indeed, it is an axiom within Native Philosophy that place is the defining attribute of reality and the lodestone that drives how people create, interact, and decipher their lived experience. On a macro level, humans define their cultural identity in relationship to the broader social networks formed by the non-human persons that already occupy their surroundings. For example, when a community moves from one place to another, they often have to take on a different character so that they can fit into the social world of their new landscape (Jojola 2004). Relational ontologies based on spatial contexts also operate on a more micro level, such as in terms of individual objects. This is how seemingly "normal" objects, such as a feather, a piece of deer hide, or a sprig of tobacco, can form an amalgam that is much more powerful than its parts. In proximity to one another, these objects interact and become something different than what they were before, at times creating a new entity all together. This view of relational ontologies is quite different from Western philosophy because it does not require the presence of humans and often happens in their absence. Nor must it attempt to dissolve the subject-object binary because this division is largely absent in Native Philosophy, in which differences between things are seen as illusionary and temporary and as reflecting a temporary "bunching" of underlying energies that tie all things together.

Spatial Epistemologies

Native Philosophers see the world as populated by non-human agents, most of whom are located in specific places. Virtually all things are defined by their relation, often spatial, to other things. Native Philosophers move beyond ontology to describe what might be called a "spatial epistemology" --an understanding that knowledge of the world is acquired through an interaction with places and the entities residing there, or what Cajete (2000:157) refers to as "natural orientation." Anthropologists and archaeologists, including those focused on the OT and those who are not, have focused on how space, landscape, taskscapes, meshworks, and so on, influence how practices, traditions, societies, and cultures all emerge from particular places. Researchers such as Keith Basso (1996) have recognized how many Indigenous peoples, particularly in North America, view their relationship with places in dramatically different fashions than their Western counterparts. In particular, the broader landscape and specific locales can act as reservoirs of knowledge, often by affording an opportunity to communicate with a much broader social and cosmological realm.

Native Philosophers have further elucidated this complex relationship between people and place. One particularly important aspect of this relationship is what Brian Burkhart (2019: xiv) calls "locality," which refers to how "being, meaning, and knowing are rooted in the land." Virtually all Native Philosophers describe a world where the land provides the experience that defines their lives, identities, and realities. Ways in which the land influences people's lives, although myriad, are based in an appreciation that all knowledge is local. Unlike Euro-American understandings of knowledge acquisition, which focus on "discovering" universe-governing laws, Native Philosophers instead highlight how Indigenous knowledge values the intimate wisdom provided by understanding the local entities and social networks that define their surroundings. Often, this wisdom is difficult to pass from one individual to another, so direct experiences are typically considered to be the best way to acquire knowledge. Because this knowledge emerges from the land, Native Philosophers describe how it is revealed or shared, rather than discovered.

Native Philosophers also often frame the acquisition of knowledge in moral terms. While Euro-Americans often describe knowledge as powerful because it can be deployed in ways that impact the world, Native Philosophers describe the power of knowledge as an inherent aspect of knowing, because such knowing brings a better understanding of a particular aspect of the world and one's place within it. Because it is so powerful and is held and revealed by non-human entities, knowledge is

value-laden and must be managed carefully. Some Native Philosophers describe the world as a "moral universe" in which people (human and not) strive to find the "right path," which involves acquiring the knowledge needed to understand their place in the broader social world. This also includes paths to maintaining balance in the universe, and, in doing so, maintaining balance in the relations among a community of human and non-human persons. It is not only human persons that contribute to this moral balance or harmony, but all entities are responsible for achieving this balance (Cordova 2007; Deloria 1999).

Concluding Remarks

Even with its flaws, the OT provides anthropologists with an innovative framework for shifting how we think about what it is to be human. It moves us away from the more traditional anthropological theories rooted in Western Science, helping us to think outside the box. However, many researchers involved in the OT have repeated some of the same Western-centric tropes that the OT should allow us to avoid. Rather than directly engaging with Native voices, they have continued to look to Western Philosophy for concepts and frameworks, when Native Philosophy offers more powerful and culturally appropriate alternatives.

As we have shown, there are many areas of overlap between the OT and Native Philosophy. By ignoring Native voices and continuing to engage exclusively with Western Philosophers, researchers in the OT are continuing the practice of Indigenous erasure from the discipline (Marín-Aguilera 2021). Directly engaging with Native Philosophy not only provides us with better understandings of Native ontologies, it also provides us with a means for decolonizing the discipline by bringing those voices into archaeological parlance, practice, and process.

To help you begin engaging with Native Philosophers, we invite you to explore the following list of readings:

Suggested Readings

Absolon Kathleen E.
 2011 *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know*. Fernwood Publishing, Black Point.

Burkhart, Brian Yazzie
 2019 *Indigenizing Philosophy Through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures*. Michigan State University Press, East Lansing.

Cajete, Gregory
 2000 *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence.* Clear Light Publishers, Santa Fe.

Chaudhuri, Jean and Joyotpaul Chaudhuri
 2001 *A Sacred Path: The Way of the Muscogee Creeks.* UCLA American Indian Studies Center, Los Angeles.

Cheney, Jim
 2005 Truth, Knowledge, and the Wild World. *Ethics and the Environment* 10:101-135.

Cheney, Jim and Lee Hester
 2000 Ceremonial Worlds and Environmental Sanity. *Strategies: Journal of Theory, Culture and Politics* 13:77-87.

Cordova, Viola F.
 2007 *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V.F. Cordova*, edited by Kathleen Dean Moore, Kurt Peters, Ted Jojola, and Amber Lacy. The University of Arizona Press, Tucson.

Deloria, Vine, Jr.
 1988 *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

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 1997 *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact*. Fulcrum Publishing, Golden.

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 1999 *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr. Reader*, edited by Barbara Deloria, Kristen Foehner, and Sam Scinta. Fulcrum Publishing, Golden.

Deloria, Vine, Jr.
 2003 *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*, 30th Anniversary edition: Fulcrum Publishing, Golden.

Deloria, Vine, Jr.
 2012 *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*. Fulcrum Publishing, Golden.

Fixico, Donald
 2003 *The American Indian Mind in a Linear World: American Indian Studies and Traditional Knowledge*. Routledge, New York.

LaPier, Rosalyn R.
 2017 *Invisible Reality: Storytellers, Storytakers, and the Supernatural World of the Blackfeet*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln

McPherson, Dennis H., and J. Douglas Rabb
 2011 *Indian from the Inside: Native American Philosophy and Cultural Renewal*. McFarland & Company, Jefferson.

Plerotti, Raymond and Daniel Wildcat
 2000 Traditional Ecological Knowledge: The Third Alternative (Commentary). *Ecological Applications* 10:1333–1340.

Salmón, Enrique
 2000 Indigenous Perceptions of the Human-Nature Relationship. *Ecological Applications* 10:1327–1332.

Waters, Anne (editor)
 2004 *American Indian Thought*. Blackwell Publishing, Malden.

Wildcat, Daniel R.
 2005 Indigenizing the Future: Why We Must Think Spatially in the Twenty-first Century. *American Studies* 46:417–440.

Wilson, Shawn
 2008 *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Fernwood Publishing, Black Point.

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Burkhart, Brian
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Descola, Philippe
  2013[2005] Beyond Nature and Culture, trans. by J. Lloyd. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Feibleman, James K.
  1951 Culture as Applied Ontology. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 1(5):416–422.

Fowles, Severin M.
  2013 An Archaeology of Doings: Secularism and the Study of Pueblo Religion. School for Advanced Research Press, Santa Fe.

Graeber, David
  2015 Radical alterity is just another way of saying "reality": A reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5(2):1–41.

Henare, Amiria, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell
  2007 Introduction: thinking through tings. In *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, edited by Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, pp. 1–31. Routledge, New York.

Jojola, Ted
  2004 Notes on Identity, Time, Space, and Place. In *American Indian Thought*, edited by Anne Waters, pp. 87–96. Blackwell Publishing, Malden.

Kohn, Eduardo
  2015 Anthropology of Ontologies. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44:311–327.

Lawres, Nathan R.
  2017 Materializing Ontology in Monumental Form: Engaging the Ontological in the Okeechobee Basin, Florida. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 73(4):647–694.

Marín-Aguilera, Beatriz
  2021 Ceci n'est pas un subaltern. A Comment on Indigenous Erasure in Ontology-Related Archaeologies. *Archaeological Dialogues* 28:133-139.

Norton-Smith, Thomas M.
  2010 The Dance of Person & Place: One Interpretation of American Indian Philosophy. State University of New York Press, Albany.

Sanger, Matthew
  2021 Joining the Circle: Native American Philosophy Applied to the Study of Late Archaic Shell Rings of the Southeastern United States. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 28:737-765.

Todd, Zoe
  2016 An Indigenous Feminist's Take on The Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word for Colonialism. *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29:4-22.

Zedeño, María Nieves
  2008 Bundled Worlds: The Roles and Interactions of Complex Objects from the North American Plains. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 15:362:378.