

Epistemologies of Henry David Thoreau & the Lakota Sioux

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Abstract: Western individualism and Indigenous communalism are contradicting epistemologies. This paper provides a comparative analysis of these epistemologies found in the writings of Henry David Thoreau and Lakota Sioux philosopher, Robert Bunge. Taking a comparative look into these epistemologies is beneficial to understanding the fundamental difference in knowledge existing between Western and Indigenous peoples. Ultimately, Western individualism has created an environment of competition to establish boundaries and define oneself. In contrast, the Lakota knowledge of community operates to sustain life through reciprocity and adjustment to one another and the natural world.

“This paper has the capacity to show the reader a deeply rooted problem with American culture by examining a modern-day conflict and exploring its philosophical origins. In times such as these, where sacred lands and swaths of wild nature are being desecrated for the sake of profit, the need to reexamine our relationship with nature is pressing. The philosophy contained here is a large step forward in building healthy and cooperative relationships with the ecosystems around us.”

- Daniel Wills
Associate Editor

On December 4, 2016, the Army Corps of Engineers under President Obama’s Administration denied a permit for further construction to the Dakota Access Pipeline. Thousands of water protectors at the site of construction celebrated the victory. However, many considered the victory futile because of then president-elect Donald Trump’s open support of the pipeline. A few weeks later, President Obama relinquished his presidential duties to Trump. On President Trump’s fourth day in office, he signed an executive order to advance the approval of the Dakota Access Pipeline. In the subsequent months, a coercive militarized police force removed the remaining peaceful water protectors from the protest site at the Dakota Access Pipeline. The Standing Rock Sioux and Cheyenne River Tribes requested a block to the final phase of pipeline construction, which a federal judge denied. Currently, it appears the president, the courts, and the police have successfully exhausted every viable option for Sioux resistance. If the pipeline is completed, it will cross the Missouri River upstream from the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. In the circumstance of a pipeline rupture, the

primary water source to the Standing Rock Sioux will become toxic.

For the Sioux, the earth is sacred and must be protected. The earth and the sky provide all living creatures the necessary resources to thrive. Human beings are an equally integral component in the vast network of relationships found in the natural world. In order for all living creatures to thrive, reciprocity and adjustment to the world around must be known and practiced. Reciprocity refers to a perpetual exchange between beings in the natural world for mutual benefit. Adjustment refers to one being a complementary component of the natural world. Rather than controlling one's environment, adjustment is the act of integrating with one's environment. The principle of reciprocity is a philosophical cornerstone in the Standing Rock Sioux's fight for water. The Sioux know water gives life, and this must be protected from oil pollution.

The Sioux give the community of the natural world priority over the individual. This principle is called collectivism. In contrast, Western individualism accepts the primacy of the individual over the community. To illustrate this epistemological contradiction, the subsequent sections of this paper provide a comparative analysis of individualism as presented by Henry David Thoreau and Lakota Sioux collectivism as presented by Robert Bunge. Thoreau was a committed liberal who wrote extensively on the importance of individualism and freedom from social responsibility. He also spent a great deal of his time in nature. However, Thoreau

never transcended his instrumental understanding of nature. Thus, Thoreau remained in isolation, apart from the natural world.

Robert Bunge, a Lakota Sioux philosopher, wrote a comprehensive book on Lakota philosophy, titled *An American Urphilosophie: An American Philosophy BP (Before Pragmatism)*. In his book, Bunge presents Lakota philosophy as it fits into the main branches of Western philosophy. This paper contends while both authors' epistemologies place an importance on one's connectedness to the natural world, Thoreau's commitment to individualism kept him from the Lakota's holistic interconnectedness. Thoreau's epistemology of individualism ultimately determined his philosophy's inability to mature past the search for self-identity. This search becomes primary and all else secondary. This logic justifies one's instrumental use of nature as a means to an end.

This paper begins by discussing both authors' moral epistemologies and their divergent views on the purpose of moral responsibility. The subsequent section discusses both authors' conceptions of one's connection to nature and its importance. Next, the paper discusses the similarities and differences in both authors' writings on the formulation of the knowledge. The following section discusses the two authors' contradictory views on one's relationship to community. The final section of this paper argues that Thoreau's egocentric philosophy justifies the search for self by any means necessary, which includes but is not limited to the

subjugation of the natural world. American individualism promotes individual achievement; however, it avoids the foresight necessary to achieve well-being for all.

Looking deeper into Thoreau and Bunge's concepts of the moral universe provides a salient insight into the chasm existing between the two epistemologies in conflict over the Dakota Access Pipeline. Moral epistemology concerns the knowledge of right and wrong conduct. Both authors agree we live in a moral universe, meaning actions should be justified by morality. Thoreau and Bunge diverge on the purpose of morality. Thoreau's moral epistemology prescribes moral responsibility to oneself. In contrast, Bunge's moral epistemology understands moral responsibility to the community.

Thoreau's individualism defines self-actualization as one's highest moral responsibility. Thoreau's moral responsibility derives from an inner sense of his own personhood, the preservation of his own autonomy, and the sanctity of his self-determined choice.¹ His moral venture is an exercise in the act of self-actualization, as an act of knowing himself and his place in the cosmos.² His epistemology is a self-discovery process. Thoreau argues self-identity can be found in a connection to the natural world. He asserts the wild as

the key element in seeking the core of our personhood.³ One finds true self-identity in knowledge acquired from interpreting nature.

For the Lakota, community is Truth. Epistemology builds upon the foundation of community. The Lakota view knowledge as a tool to understand one's place in the moral universe. Once one understands their place in the moral universe, the epistemological goal becomes one's adjustment to nature. The Lakota epistemology of community "stems an ethic that expounds adjustment to nature both human and non-human which underpins Native American ethical thought and axiology."⁴ Lakota philosophy does not set out to intellectually conquer Truth or search for the meaning of self. The Lakota establish Truth as community, one finds identity in community, and knowledge functions for knowing one's place in the moral universe. Furthermore, every individual has the capacity to influence or effect real good or evil by observance or neglect of the rites and duties that bring about harmony or lack of it. Therefore, Lakota collectivism is driven by a moral responsibility to interact with the community of the natural world in a way that promotes a positive universal effect.

Both Bunge and Thoreau agree their moral epistemological goals can

¹ Alfred Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001), 163.
² Alfred Tauber, "Thoreau's Moral Epistemology and Its Contemporary Relevance," in *Thoreau's Importance for Philosophy*, ed. Rick Anthony Furtak, Jonathan Ellsworth, and James D. Reid (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 134.
³ Alfred Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001), 170.
⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

be achieved by establishing a relationship of connectedness to the natural world. However, Thoreau fails to transcend an instrumental understanding of nature. Nature's purpose is to provide insight to its viewer. Thus, he creates a division where the individual holds the dominant position. Thoreau offers an incomplete portrait of moral identity by isolating himself from a responsibility to community. His moral epistemology fails to transcend individual autonomy, self-actualization, and the search for self-identity. In a moral epistemology of community, one finds self-identity in one's integral part of the community of the natural world. Thoreau views nature as a means to an end in finding oneself, but the self always remains in the dominant position. This brings us to an important split between Thoreau and Bunge's conceptions of connectedness.

Bunge and Lakota collectivism does not view the individual to hold the dominant position over the natural world. The Lakota understand the universe as an interconnected whole, of which the individual is only a small part. Every living being must be a reciprocal contributor in order for all to thrive. Bunge gives a story that explains an example of the reciprocity: there is a nut used by the Lakota for seasoning many types of foods; this nut grows in the heart of a thorny bush, which is inaccessible to humans if they wish to avoid serious pain.⁵ However, the field mouse can access

the nuts. The mouse stores the nuts in its burrow.⁶ In order to acquire this nut for cooking, Lakota women follow the mouse to its burrow and exchange an insignificant amount for cheese or bacon.⁷ The Lakota understand reciprocal exchange is necessary to maintain the great chain of life in the natural world.

Both believe in the existence of unknowns that science cannot explain and that there are no fixed boundaries of human knowledge. Moreover, both agree the highest form of knowledge is found when one enters into the realm of the unknown and listens for its message. Both see mystical knowledge as a function and affirmation of one's connectedness to the natural world.

Thoreau understands the connection to the natural world as one's path to the highest form of knowledge, a place where one can truly find identity. These moments come in times of total integration with the natural world. According to Thoreau,

My desire for knowledge is intermittent, but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant. . . . [I desire] a discovery that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy. It is the lightening up of the mist by the sun. Man cannot know in any higher sense than this, any more than he can look serenely

and with impunity in the face of the sun.⁸

Thoreau contends one's integration with nature to be a teacher of knowledge that science and philosophy cannot explain.

Thoreau often speaks of these epistemological journeys in nature as being absent of time. Thoreau searches for mystical knowledge in conversations with the unknown, in which a moment feels eternal and the chains of time are shed. Thoreau articulates this concept beautifully in *Walden*:

I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon in the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those season like corn in the night.⁹

Thoreau argues moments absent from the restraints of time hold the key to unlocking knowledge's highest form. For Thoreau, mystical experiences occur when one can enter into an altered state of consciousness absent of time.

In contrast, Bunge and the Lakota believe there are two forms of mystical knowledge: revelational knowledge and Wakán. The Lakota consider revelational knowledge,

acquired intuitively or in a dream or vision, an unquestioned form of knowledge.¹⁰ Wakán is the form of mystical knowledge only accessible by a "medicine man." One becomes a medicine man through a vision. The vision reveals certain instructions to the individual about how to devote his life to sacred things and healing.¹¹ These healers possess the ability to understand a spiritual transmission, inaccessible to the ordinary human. The spiritual transmission guides the medicine man's healing and formulation of knowledge.

Although both authors agree on the importance of mystical knowledge, the motivation for attaining mystical knowledge is quite different. Thoreau uses mystical knowledge as another tool in his toolbox for the self-actualization of the individual. On the contrary, the Lakota use revelational knowledge to know their place in the natural world. Furthermore, Wakán is knowledge obtained by the healer to pass healing or knowledge to others. Thus, Lakota mystical knowledge promotes collectivism, specifically by informing adjustment and reciprocity.

Regardless of Thoreau and Bunge's epistemological similarities, the defining distinguishing concept is one's interaction with community. For both authors, interaction with community is consequential of their moral epistemologies. Bunge and the Lakota understand the community to

⁵ Robert Bunge, *An American Urphilosophie: An American Philosophy BP (Before Pragmatism)* (Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1984), 98.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," *The Atlantic*, June 1862.

⁹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1992), 92-93.

¹⁰ Bunge, *An American Urphilosophie*, 75.

¹¹ Ibid., 72.

be existential, while Thoreau prioritizes the autonomy of the individual. A long history of tribalism shapes Bunge and the Lakota's epistemological understanding on the individual's responsibility to community. Thoreau believes mass society imprisons individuals in a cell of conformity. To avoid conformity, Thoreau prioritizes himself above the community. Thoreau forms his epistemology of individualism in reaction to the effects of mass society on the nature of the human. Bunge would agree with Thoreau's critique of mass society. However, both authors' understandings of the individual's responsibility to community are in contradiction. This contradiction widens the split between Thoreau and Bunge's shared philosophical path.

Clarity in the contraction of individualism and collectivism can be found in the specific details within both authors' epistemologies. Thoreau argues mass society impedes people through the tyranny of rules, regulations, culture, and social norms. These regulatory systems influence mass conformity at the expense of freedom of will. Thoreau contends government imposes undue regulations on individuals, hampering one's ability to direct one's own life. Thoreau especially disagrees with the government's ability to impose taxes used to fund welfare programs. Thoreau views philanthropy, whether individual or state-sponsored, as repulsive and unnecessary. Thoreau's ideal society would be made up of re-

sponsible self-actualizing individuals, which he believes would eliminate the need for social welfare.

Also, Thoreau fails to transcend an understanding of one's responsibility to anything but oneself. Thoreau's nature study functions to define the coordinates of knowing, a project dedicated to establishing the agency of the knower.¹² Thoreau approaches knowledge from the standpoint of individual achievement. He uses moral responsibility as a tool to build one's understanding of self. Thus, Thoreau continually places the individual in the dominant role in his writings and philosophy.

In contrast, the Lakota understand community in large and small forms. The larger refers to relation to the natural world as explained above. The smaller community is made up of one's family, friends, and people directly included in one's life. Three fundamental moral responsibilities present in the Lakota epistemology of community are reciprocal appropriation, social participation, and giving. Reciprocal appropriation refers to one's moral responsibility to a mutual self-investment in the members of one's immediate community.¹³ The goal here is to absorb other selves into one's personal being in a reciprocal practice.¹⁴ The Lakota value the second of these fundamental responsibilities, social participation, as the highest moral responsibility. All members of the Lakota community contribute to the community, and all contributions are valued. The Lakota

understand individual satisfaction and fulfillment in life to come from community contribution.¹⁵ Finally, gift-giving is a fundamental aspect of communal participation. The Lakota collect material possession in order to give them away to members in the community. Welfare, giving, and philanthropy define the Lakota community.

In conclusion, Thoreau's radical individualism keeps him from a holistic interconnectedness. Thoreau's epistemology rejects community, and alone he became lost in the woods of his futile search for self. Ironically, the Lakota need not search because they understand self to be profoundly visible when one immerses in the community. Bunge and the Lakota find self-identity in relatedness and an existential understanding of the earth. The Lakota moral epistemology understands the individual to be in a reciprocal relationship with the community of the natural world. The Lakota prioritize one's adjustment to community over one's achievements as an individual.

Comparing Thoreau and Bunge is instrumental in understanding the fundamental difference in epistemology between Western peoples and Native Americans. Individualism is an essential concept of the American economy, culture, and legal and political systems. Individualism creates a societal environment where individuals struggle to improve and define their individual selves, similar to Thoreau's epistemological journey. Unfortunately, material im-

provement has become the common misconceived vehicle to self-identity. Community has little relevance when a society chooses to prioritize the individual, private property, and profit. Thoreau's endless search for self-identity illustrates an inherent contradiction of individualism—one defines barriers of self-autonomy; however, the search for self-identity must look beyond those barriers.

In the circumstance of the Dakota Access Pipeline, the Standing Rock Sioux and activists are not only protesting the pipeline but also the core of American society—American individualism. They are fighting against an idea that justifies man's dominant position over the world around him. Following from this logic, man has the right to subdue the earth for his personal gain. For example, the Dakota Access Pipeline will certainly generate revenue for the Energy Transfer Partners and its investors. However, this revenue may likely come at the expense of an entire ecosystem's water source. We must dismantle the notion that profit justifies ecocide. If we do not, humans will expend and destroy the earth's resources until we will no longer be able to inhabit the earth. Now, more urgent than ever, we must learn from the Standing Rock Sioux and fight for the respect of our Earth. Water is life. For "only when the last tree has died, the last river been poisoned, and the last fish been caught, will we realize we cannot eat money."¹⁶

¹² Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau*, 221.

¹³ Robert Bunge, "Community: Key to Survival," 12 (Winter 1988).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶ Cree Proverb.



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