

Article

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Ecological Self-Understanding: A Cross-Cultural Epistemic Virtue in Contemporary Native American and Confucian Philosophy

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Abstract | Cross-cultural analyses often emphasize differences between worldviews. While there are significant differences across the diverse ways that humanity has understood itself, the tendency to emphasize differences can obscure important and revealing commonalities between worldviews as well. The goal of this article is to identify one such commonality among indigenous worldviews and their capacity to address our collective ecological well-being together on planet Earth. Specifically, I will argue that contemporary philosophers Viola Cordova and Tu Weiming exhibit ecological self-understanding as an epistemic virtue in their conceptions of human existence. Ecological self-understanding (ESU) is veridical acknowledgement of human beings as embodied agents in the world, fundamentally situated within interdependent relations between self and environment. As contemporary exemplars of Native American and Confucian philosophy, respectively, Cordova and Tu illustrate how both worldviews exhibit ESU and thereby serve as models toward the cultivation of ecological well-being.

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Introduction

We humans have become rather deplorable planetary citizens, dishing out a level of collective environmental damage that is unprecedented in the known history of our planet. We have polluted the Earth's land, water, and atmosphere to alarming degrees, irreversibly changing global ecology in ways that will negatively affect our lives for countless generations. We have brought about mass extinctions that are dramatically reducing the biodiversity of the planet at an accelerated rate, and have more generally reshaped the face of the Earth in a manner that will be observable across geological epochs.¹ In light of our collective impact on the world, it is reasonable, if not imperative, for us to ask ourselves: Who do we think we are?

This is not a new question, of course. Different worldviews have offered various answers to this question across cultures and throughout history. Some humans have conceived of themselves as made in the image of a God, for instance, as free moral beings who transcend the natural world. Others have considered themselves the ruling masters of our planetary domain, entitled to utilize and manipulate the world's resources as they wish. Arguably, it is the combined legacy of such perspectives in the modern worldview that lies behind our current ecological crisis, such that assumed transcendence of and /or domination over the natural world has led to our now obviously unsustainable behavior (White 1967). Considering that our current planetary circumstances may originate in our own conception of ourselves, environmental philosophers are urging us to rethink who we are and

how we stand in relation to our planet, moving toward a more environmentally virtuous understanding (e.g. Callicott 2013 and Jamieson 2014).

I agree with this environmental impetus toward critical self-evaluation. However, we do not have to think anew, starting from scratch, in developing a more ecologically viable understanding of ourselves. I submit that the kind of understanding we need to establish ecological well-being already exists, within the worldviews of indigenous cultures that emphasize our interactive interdependence with the natural world.² More particularly, I will argue that indigenous thought originating in two of the most ecologically damaging nations in the world today, the U.S. and China, can offer viable illustrations of ecological self-understanding for human well-being.

The indigenous worldviews I focus on here are Native American and Confucian philosophy. Given that these are rich traditions involving diverse cultures and complex histories, however, it is important to clarify the scope of how these worldviews will be represented and addressed in this essay. I will limit attention to contemporary philosophical perspectives, focusing in particular on a relatively recent exemplar from each tradition: Viola Cordova (1937-2002), a Jicarilla Apache philosopher whose work develops Native American thought in contrast to Western philosophy in a distinctly provocative and critical manner, and Tu Weiming (1940-), a leading advocate of the contemporary relevance of Confucian philosophy.

Although specifically a member of the Jicarilla Apache nation, which is one among thousands of distinct indigenous cultures that have inhabited what we now regard as North America, Cordova self-identified as a “Native American” philosopher and spoke about Native American perspectives in general throughout her work. This should not be mistaken for an over-generalized erasure of difference, however. Cordova herself was knowledgeable of multiple traditions,³ and indeed one of the central notions she identifies with Native American worldviews in general is a positive recognition of diversity and the situated existence of unique peoples in specific geographic locations. Nevertheless, she describes an underlying unity of perspective across the diverse indigenous peoples of North America, distilling a plausible synthesis of general “Native American” philosophy in her observations and analyses of human existence.⁴ I will follow suit with her use of

this term accordingly, characterizing Cordova’s work as representative of contemporary Native American philosophy.

Similar considerations apply to Tu Weiming and his treatment of Confucian philosophy, which of course is a long-standing intellectual tradition indigenous to China. Confucianism has a very rich history with numerous internal debates and intellectual trajectories, not to mention complicated interconnections with other related traditions and worldviews as well (i.e. Daoism and Buddhism). Tu Weiming himself hails from a lineage of “New Confucian” philosophers who reconstructed Confucian thought in response to the modernist developments of the 20th century, although he regularly speaks simply of Confucianism in general across the body of his work. While he does not necessarily always speak for all Confucians, he is undoubtedly a leading figure who can be reasonably taken as an exemplary voice for what Confucianism has become and what it has to offer to the contemporary world.

With these qualifications in mind, I will characterize the work of these philosophers as representative of living indigenous traditions in the world today. To be clear, however, my goal is not to “convert” anyone to either perspective. While I agree with much (but not all) of what I discuss later in this article, I do not subscribe to either worldview as a whole. Rather than advocating for a particular worldview, my purpose here is to illustrate how both worldviews exhibit a generalizable epistemic virtue that can serve as a guideline for other worldviews as well. Cross-cultural analyses often emphasize differences between worldviews, but my purpose here is to identify a point of commonality between indigenous worldviews and their shared capacity to address our collective well-being together as a species on planet Earth. Specifically, I submit that both worldviews exhibit ecological self-understanding as an epistemic virtue that other worldviews would be wise to adopt as well. Let us begin with a description of this virtue, followed by its exemplification through the work of these representative contemporary figures from notable indigenous traditions.

Ecological Self-Understanding⁵

Ecological self-understanding (ESU hereafter) is *veridical recognition of oneself as an embodied agent in the world, fundamentally situated within a broader context*

of interdependent relations between self and environment. A worldview exhibits ESU if it conceives of individual human beings in terms of their relations to both other human beings and the broader environmental processes through which they live their lives, and thereby cultivates ecologically responsible agency through that orientation toward the human condition.

I propose that ESU, thus conceived, is a cross-cultural epistemic virtue. It is a virtue in the sense that it is a desirable trait to cultivate toward the end of human well-being. ESU is specifically an *epistemic* virtue in that it most directly pertains to the cognitive states and conceptual structures involved in the formation of beliefs and worldviews, rather than the behavioral traits addressed by ethical virtues (not to say that these are not interrelated in important ways, however). Moreover, I choose to frame ESU in epistemic terms, rather than as a metaphysical claim, because I will maintain that it is achievable by multiple worldviews with variable metaphysical details. While it does constrain certain metaphysical parameters, ESU is fundamentally a normative epistemic orientation towards understanding, rather than a direct metaphysical doctrine or worldview in itself. Relatedly, ESU is a *cross-cultural* virtue in the sense that it is not specific to any one culture or worldview, but rather can be found across otherwise divergent worldviews and is a desirable trait for all worldviews to instantiate.

In both Eastern and Western approaches to virtue (e.g. Aristotelian and Confucian virtue ethics: see Yu 2007), it is fairly standard to frame virtues as ideally balanced states between vices of deficiency and excess. Courage, for example, is an ideal state of virtuous action between the vices of cowardice and foolhardiness. While this framework is not essential to the conception of ESU as an epistemic virtue, it will help to conceive of ESU in this manner, as displayed in [Table 1](#).

Worldviews vary across this spectrum of vice and virtue. Our focus will be on how Native American and Confucian worldviews both exhibit the virtue of

ESU, however it will be instructive to briefly contrast some examples of vice here as well. I wager that the mind / body (“Cartesian”) dualism inherent in classical Western thought and mainstream Christianity, such that humans are conceived as immaterial souls who transcend their bodily existence, exhibits the vice of self-focused bias. As White (1967) argues, this epistemic foundation has led us to view the natural world as a mindless domain to be mastered by our transcendent rational minds, which is a major ideological factor behind our current ecological crisis.

It is easy to fixate on Western culture as the source of environmental problems, but ecological vice can be found in the East as well. I wager that the transcendental idealism found in certain strains of Indian philosophy exhibits the vice of self-denial. Consider the following passage from the Katha Upanishad:

Atman, the Spirit of vision, is never born and never dies. Before him there was nothing, and he is ONE for evermore. Never born and eternal, beyond times gone or to come, he does not die when the body dies. If the slayer thinks that he kills, and if the slain thinks that he dies, neither knows the ways of truth. The Eternal in man cannot kill: the Eternal in man cannot die. Concealed in the heart of all beings is the Atman, the Spirit, the Self; smaller than the smallest atom, greater than the vast spaces. The man who surrenders his human will leaves sorrows behind, and beholds the glory of the Atman by the grace of the Creator (Mascaró 1965, 59).

From this perspective, we are most fundamentally neither our individual human bodies nor individual souls. Instead, the appearance of our temporary individual existence is regarded as illusion (Maya), with the fundamental basis of all reality being a single unchanging Self, Atman. Here we see the direct negation of embodied agency, such that individual actions are surrendered unto an eternal transcendent reality. While this may lack the robust egocentric drive behind the

Table 1: *Ecological self-understanding as an epistemic virtue*

Vice of Deficiency	Virtue	Vice of Excess
Self-Ignorance & /or Denial	Ecological Self-Understanding	Egocentric Self-Focused Bias
failure to recognize oneself as an embodied agent in the world, through either ignorance or denial of one’s individual existence in the world as a relational being	recognition of oneself as an embodied agent in the world, viewing one’s nature and actions in terms of the interdependent relations one has to others and the world	view of self as a privileged or transcendent being apart from the world, failing to acknowledge one’s relational dependency and/or impact on others and the world

modern Western attempt to dominate nature, it does not live up to the responsible agency acknowledged and cultivated by ESU, and thus also fails to deliver a fully viable framework for encountering our current environmental circumstances as an embodied species on planet Earth.

These are by no means the only salient examples of vice to consider. However, our goal here is not to pinpoint blame on those responsible for human viciousness, but rather to identify and illustrate viable ESU as a model of epistemic virtue. With that in mind, let us move on to a positive portrayal of ESU through identification of its central features and their exemplification in the work of Cordova and Tu.

Embodied Relationality

ESU begins with recognition of our existence as embodied beings. To say that we are embodied beings is to acknowledge that we are part of the physical world, rather than associating ourselves with a transcendent domain that stands apart from the natural world. Such embodiment involves embeddedness within a network of physical relationships, and thus embodiment is fundamentally relational in nature. Although acknowledgement of our embodied relationality can be informed by science and runs counter to doctrines of metaphysical transcendence, acknowledgement of embodied relationality does not necessarily require any particular scientific substantiation or metaphysical ideology. Just as people can refer to water in a veridical manner without knowing it is composed of H₂O or having any particular metaphysical view of its nature, so too can worldviews acknowledge our embodied relationality without any particular scientific knowledge or metaphysical framework attached. It only requires general acknowledgement of the fact that we are fundamentally embodied beings, existing within relational networks amidst the natural world.

Such embodied relationality is fundamental to Native American philosophy, as exhibited in the work of Cordova. She begins a general “Credo” of Native American beliefs with the following central statement:

Human beings are a part of a whole that is greater than the individual. A human is not something *apart from* the Earth and the rest of its creations, including rocks, trees, water, and air; he is a natural *part of* the Earth. (2007, 151).

Right away, we see a stark contrast from the vices of self-denial and self-focused bias, with human individuals understood as a part of the Earth. This perspective emphasizes our existence within the natural world and, importantly, extends into our social relationships and interspecies interactions as well. Throughout her work, Cordova describes humans as “herd beings” who live within cultural social units situated within particular geographical locales and ecological niches, with the “we” of the group taking precedent over the “I” of the individual (153-8). Humans exist as individual agents within such groups, as we will see below, but each individual’s agency is cultivated within the context of a cultural group, itself being a “herd” that is a part of the natural world.

Moreover, human herds are themselves just one kind of life form among myriad others sharing a world together:

Humans are not superior to other life forms. They are simply different. This difference is natural in a world that displays a vast variety of diverse life forms. Humans are one among many others, and all are “equal” in the sense that they all depend on some very specific conditions of the planet Earth in order to survive. (152).

Classical Confucianism is more exclusively focused on the human domain, although it too emphasizes our embodied relationality and has been more recently extended into a broader ecological context in the “New Confucian” lineage emphasized by Tu Weiming (2001). For example, in the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大学), a core Confucian text, the central project of achieving harmony and virtue through moral self-cultivation is situated within relations between a person and their family, state, and world. Speaking of this embodied network of relations and its applicable extension to ecology, Tu states:

This holistic vision of a peaceful world rests on a carefully integrated program of personal self-cultivation, harmonized family life, and well-ordered states. At the heart of this vision is a sense that “home” implies not only the human community, but also the natural world and the larger cosmos (2001, 248).

Building upon the core Confucian concept of *tian-ren-heyi* (天人合一), often translated as the “unity of

Heaven and humanity,” Tu characterizes Confucianism here as:

... an anthropocosmic worldview, in which the human is embedded in the cosmic order, rather than an anthropocentric worldview, in which the human is alienated, either by choice or by default, from the natural world (244).

Interestingly, Cordova shares Tu’s rejection of the alienation that tends to go along with anthropocentric conceptions of humans as distinct from the rest of nature, further adding that such alienation is an aberration from a healthy understanding of the human condition:

Human beings are not “fallen” creatures; they are what the Earth intended. Most of all, they “fit” in this world because they are products of it. A sense of alienation from the world and its many beings would not, in this context, be seen as the common malady of individuals but as a psychotic disruption, an illness (2007, 151).

Although Tu’s Confucianism and Cordova’s Native American philosophy offer otherwise quite different worldviews, this emphasis on our natural interrelated existence within the physical world reveals their adherence to the virtue of ESU, such that we humans are fundamentally understood in terms of our embodied relationality with each other and our surrounding natural environment.

It is worth adding that both Cordova and Tu speak about us as “spiritual” beings, but in both cases this spirituality is not otherworldly, involving distinction between the spiritual and the natural. Instead, for both philosophers, spirituality is fundamentally infused with our embodied relationality in the natural world. To this effect, Cordova states that:

A human is both spirit and nonspirit, mind and body, matter and energy at the same time and requires both to exist in unison in order to *be* (as opposed to nonbeing) anything at all (2007, 151-2).

In a similar fashion, Tu, in describing the spiritual pursuit of self-knowledge and moral development that he finds central to the Confucian tradition, says that:

... the actual process of self-development, far

from being a quest for pure morality or spirituality, necessarily involves the biological, psychological, and sociological realities of human life (1981, 259).

While spirituality is not an essential component of ESU per se, the fact that both Cordova and Tu situate the spiritual aspects of their worldviews within the context of our embodied relationality, rather than delegating spirituality to an otherworldly domain, demonstrates how spiritual traditions can be compatible with an emphasis on our concrete natural existence as beings in the world. I submit that this is a lesson that all spiritually-oriented worldviews could adopt, hopefully moving toward more ecologically-viable understanding of our existence in *this world* rather than fixating on the supposition of another one. The more general take-home point here, however, is that both of these indigenous philosophers emphasize our fundamental interrelatedness with the natural world as embodied beings, regardless of whether our embodied existence is further characterized as spiritual. We do not stand apart from the natural world. Rather, our presence in the world is itself a natural part of the world.

Relational Agency

It is crucial for ESU to acknowledge human agency, in terms of our capacity to make responsible decisions within the networks of relationships in which we live. Again, this does not require any particular metaphysical framework (e.g. ESU is compatible with metaphysical libertarianism or soft determinism), as long as the worldview in question somehow acknowledges the fact that developed human beings can make decisions in a self-reflective manner for which they are responsible as causally efficacious agents. Moreover, in keeping with our embodied relationality, such agency must also be understood in acknowledgement of the interdependent connections individual agents have with others and the world, rather than exclusively focusing on the interests of the individual agent alone (as does, say, mainstream so-called “rational” choice theory).

Both Confucianism and Native American philosophy emphasize our agency as human beings, and do so by situating agents amidst their worldly relations, not as myopically self-interested individualists, but rather as transformative group members actively engaged in

mutual development.

Describing the central pursuit of virtuous self-cultivation at the heart of the Confucian tradition, Tu states:

To Confucian followers, what the master exemplifies is a way to live and a starting point of self-cultivation. Through establishing one's character as a conscientious, responsible person, one helps others establish the same through an ever-expanding network of mutually beneficial human relationships (2011, 88).

Taking Confucius as an exemplar of virtuous self-cultivation, the Confucian project is to transform oneself into a moral agent who can further cultivate harmonious relations in daily life by being an example to others. Extending this agential project from human social relations to the broader environmental relations we saw earlier with Tu's anthropocosmic worldview, Confucianism itself becomes an exemplary model for ESU, such that we can understand ourselves as embodied beings in the world who share responsibility in shaping both ourselves and the course of the world in which we live. To this effect, Tu states:

Human beings are not merely creatures but are positive co-creators of the cosmos and of the natural world... From the Confucian perspective, since we are co-creators, we are obligated to perform our duty not only as beneficiaries but as contributors to the cosmic process (108).

Cordova's Native American philosophy likewise emphasizes agency in the context of relational development and worldly participation. By her description, infants are "humanoids" who require shared cultural development to become responsible human agents. To this effect, she states:

An infant is seen as becoming "human" when he or she demonstrates the fact that he is aware that his actions have consequences on others and the world. Becoming a human is a responsibility of the group that teaches the new being what it is to be human in *this* group of beings.... He is taught to be human by showing him that he is one human among others. Because he shares the world with other beings, there is an emphasis on cooperation rather than competition: sharing rather than accumulating (2007, 152-3).

It is important to add here that the individual is not simply subsumed by the group as a mindless member of a herd. The individual is indeed conceived as a member of a herd on Cordova's account, but this actually enhances, rather than minimizes, the responsible autonomy of human agency:

A sense of oneself as a part of a greater whole does not lead to a loss of a sense of self. There is no such thing as a "herd mentality"; instead, there is a greater sense of oneself as a responsible human being (157).

Placing this responsible agency within the context of our embedded relationality in nature, we get the consequence that our agency is a component of ecology:

The ecosystem... is made up of interacting and interdependent communities. It is time to see that humans are a part of the ecological web and that they too play a vital role – not as stewards over an inferior and mindless nature – but as a necessary part of a healthy and diverse system of life (207).

Because the self is understood in terms of its relations to others and the surrounding environment, agential action becomes not just a matter of egocentrically constrained self-interest but rather mutually beneficial responsibility for oneself as an active participant in the world. In this sense, the combined acknowledgement of embodied relationality with agency leads to an enhanced sense of responsibility for oneself as a member of the world, as befits the virtue of ESU.

Given their emphasis on relational agency in their understanding of the human condition, Tu's Confucianism and Cordova's Native American philosophy enable us to see how worldviews can foster ESU through their normative frameworks for human life. I propose that such understanding of agency is fundamental to developing sustainable ecological well-being across human worldviews. Without a relational understanding of agency, fundamentally situated within our embodied existence as natural beings in the world, our decision-making will likely continue to take into consideration only the myopic egocentric concerns of seemingly exclusive human self-interests, perpetuating the problems that have brought us to the point of widespread environmental degradation. Moving toward a relational understanding of human agency,

on the other hand, would properly widen the scope of our agential responsibility and decision-making to include the environmental relations upon which we ourselves depend.

In this manner, we may also overcome the debate between seeing nature as either intrinsically valuable in itself or merely instrumentally valuable for human purposes, which has divided approaches to environmental ethics in contemporary discourse. As Hourdequin and Wong (2005) have also argued, the relational understanding of humans and the world found in both Chinese and Native American thought enables us to see ourselves as a part of nature and to see nature as a part of us, such that there is no fundamental conflict between the instrumental and intrinsic value of nature. Insofar as we value ourselves in our agential responsibilities, ESU and relational agency entail that we ought to simultaneously value the natural world in which we live as well.

Conclusion: Towards Global Indigenous Cosmopolitanism

Ecological self-understanding (ESU) is a cross-cultural epistemic virtue of global significance for the well-being of humanity. Through the examples of our representative indigenous philosophers, we can see how ESU is achievable across multiple and otherwise divergent contemporary worldviews. While we do not all share the same specific indigenous roots, cultural practices, and background beliefs, we do all share the fact that we are embodied agents on a single planet. In this respect, we would all do well to follow the general epistemic orientation prescribed by the virtue of ESU. This does not mean that we should move toward a single monolithic culture or worldview, however. In this respect, it is worth reiterating that ESU is a cross-cultural virtue that can apply as a generalizable normative guideline across worldviews, rather than being a worldview in itself. Both Cordova and Tu themselves emphasize the diversity of human cultures in their work, while also acknowledging that diverse cultures are part of a broader global existence. Our differences across diverse human populations are important and valuable, as uniquely situated elements of our varied ways of living in the world. At the same time, however, we are all equally parts of the same global ecology. The term “indigenous” applies to specific groups who understand themselves as historically embedded within particular geographic locales,

just as I have been using it in reference Cordova’s and Tu’s conceptions of Native American and Confucian worldviews. My closing suggestion is simply that we extend this same understanding to our global existence as a species, in consideration of the fact that we are all historically situated members of the same planetary ecology. In doing so, perhaps we will recognize that we are all indigenous people in the global cosmopolitan sense that this one world, our planet Earth, is our collective home, the well-being of which is fundamentally intertwined with our own.

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Endnotes

[1] For current information on our collective planetary impact as a species, see *The Anthropocene Review*: <http://journals.sagepub.com/home/anr>.

[2] In this respect, I am in agreement with Callicott 1994, although I will focus on epistemology and contemporary representatives of indigenous thought,

rather than ethical traditions per se. For an account of ecological self-understanding in classical Chinese and Neo-Confucian thought, see the work of my colleague and research partner, Brasovan 2016 & 2017.

[3] Cordova’s doctoral dissertation was on the Navajo, for instance, which led to her becoming the first Native American woman to earn a Ph.D. in philosophy (Cordova 1992).

[4] In her own words: “One of the objections to studying “Native American philosophy” is that the groups called “Native American” represent too diverse a group to subsume under one label. The ideas of each group, it is argued, might be so different as to require an exploration of each group. In other words, one cannot generalize about the Native American peoples. The same is also argued in defending the diversity of European peoples and their thought: “A Descartes and Kant are not the same,” one might hear. Nevertheless, there are enough similarities in the thought patterns of Descartes and Kant that no one would doubt that both are “Western” thinkers. We will see that there are, spread throughout the Americas, some similar concepts that allow one to speak of Native American thought *in general* (Cordova 2007, 3).”

[5] I follow Riggs’ understanding of “understanding” here: “The phenomenon I wish to pick out to call “understanding” is the state of grasping a (sufficiently accurate) perspectival representation of some part of the world (Riggs 2015, 19).”