

# **Process Ontology in Early American Pragmatism, Buddhism, and Native American Thought**

B. Steve Csaki  
East Central University

Many, or perhaps it is more accurate to say most, Native American philosophers have made efforts to offer clear explanations of the critically important differences between traditional Western philosophical positions and those of native thinkers.<sup>1</sup> This is an important and necessary step in order for mainstream philosophers to begin to understand, appreciate, and value Native thought. I do not disagree with most of what has been written in this regard. However, in this paper I would like to focus on similarities that exist in one Western school of philosophy—the only truly American school of Western philosophy—early American Pragmatism, and Native philosophy. I shall also offer similarities found in Eastern thought, focusing specifically on Zen Buddhism.

The basis for comparison is the ontology expressed in all three philosophical approaches. Ontological positions are the basis or foundation for all other areas of philosophical investigation. In other words, the way we understand the world and our relationship to it is fundamental to our epistemology (how we can know things) and our ethics (how we ought to live towards others), to name just two areas of philosophical endeavor. I find it interesting that the similarity in ontologies seems to result in a profound challenge for any of these three ways of seeing and understanding the world to be expressed in terms of a simple epistemological system. Traditional Western philosophers have been quick to reject any philosophy that lacks a coherent and systematic epistemology.<sup>2</sup> The view seems to be that if you cannot present an epistemological system that is easily separated from the ontology, then somehow it's not "real" philosophy and cannot be taken seriously. I shall end my paper with a discussion of why it is that all three of the philosophies that I am discussing do have extremely important epistemological components<sup>3</sup> as well as ethical implications. However, since

---

<sup>1</sup> One thing I might like to add to the discussion is that I think it would be helpful to make a distinction between pre-Christian Western thought and what has come after the medieval thinkers re-presented Greek thought to the world. I think one could argue that there is less of a chasm between early Greek thought and Native thought than there is between post-Christian Western thought and Native thought.

<sup>2</sup> William James' philosophy was and continues to be rejected (by some) for this very reason. Many Asian philosophies are likewise ignored.

<sup>3</sup> I do not mean to suggest that James, in particular, did not present and work on an epistemology for his pragmatic methodology. However, due to its apparent relativistic tendencies, I believe it is not taken seriously by most mainstream philosophers.

their epistemologies are not easily presented in a manner that appeals to—or is acceptable to—traditional Western philosophers they have not garnered as much philosophical attention.

William James introduced his notion of “radical empiricism” as the basis for Pragmatism after coming to realize that Western philosophy had been going in the wrong direction since (at least) Descartes’ absolutist dualism had firmly taken hold of mainstream philosophical thought. James was a committed anti-dualist. He saw that we were actually moving further away from a true understanding of our world rather than towards that goal. What was “radical” about James’ empiricism was that he rejected the standard subject/object dichotomy that was typically understood as the very basis for any empirical approach. For James, this type of observation took for granted that the observer was part and parcel of that being viewed. There was no true separation between “subject” and “object.” As James puts one aspect of this, “The relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as ‘real’ as anything else in the system” (*Essays*, loc. 493).

Some of his contemporaries thought he was talking nonsense, but James went further. Not only did he intend to blur the distinction between subject and (observed) object, he also maintained that there was no stasis to be found in reality. There were no substantial things “out there,” nothing that did not change. Harkening back to Heraclitus, James argued that everything is in motion and change is the only constant. Now, the way that he expressed this was primarily through what he called “pure experience” and the “stream of consciousness.” Pure experience is experience without thought about that experience. It is as James says, “*materia prima*,” where “thought-stuff” and “thing-stuff” are identical (*Essays*, loc. 1359). Abstract thought functions largely through and with concepts. Concepts are experience(s) frozen, static, and cut out from the relations that exist in the “original” or pure experience. The production of conceptual understanding is a second order activity based upon pure experience. Our thoughts are also like that Heraclitean stream. They are in constant motion. It is not possible to freeze thought as it occurs. Ideas, concepts, thoughts, etc., are the products of that never-ending<sup>4</sup> stream that can course either deeply, or less so.

Given this particular view of experience, it is not surprising that the pragmatic methodology is born. It is a methodology that is used to get by in the world. A pragmatist is primarily interested in solving problems that are immediate and critical. Of course, the pragmatic method can be applied to more mundane issues as well. The successful application of the method results in knowledge, but for James this knowledge has relative truth, as does all knowledge. James asserts, “True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we can not” (*Pragmatism* 92). I would argue that this particular approach to understanding and knowledge is compatible with Native thought. I shall return to discuss James’ epistemology in relation to Native epistemology once I have discussed Buddhist and Native American thought.

---

<sup>4</sup> Of course, I mean never-ending so long as we are alive and our brains are functioning “normally.”

Let us turn our attention to Zen Buddhist ontology, as I shall introduce and offer explanations for a couple of key aspects that are comparable to Native positions. First, let me say that what I am about to do is somewhat artificial in the sense that a true understanding of Buddhist ontology requires an examination of *all* the doctrines,<sup>5</sup> but due to time/length restrictions I am cherry-picking the two that I think best illustrate the similarities between Buddhism and Native thought. For the record, I think the same should be said with respect to Pragmatism and Native philosophy as well.

The two terms I am going to discuss are impermanence and relational origination (sometimes also called codependent origination). The first is simple, but absolutely essential to understanding the dynamic aspect of Buddhist ontology. The doctrine states that nothing lasts forever. Everything is impermanent. There is no eternal substance. All things change. This is essentially an empirical observation that as Ken Inada states, focuses “on the nature of experiential reality” (233). This is no secret, but even though we see change everywhere we look, people don’t like to see this basic truth as an ultimate truth largely because it reminds us that we are finite beings who may well have short lives; as a result impermanence is viewed as a defect that must be overcome. In other words, traditional Western philosophy has sided with the much more comforting notion that there is, in fact, permanence “out there,” and further that human beings have special access to it. In fact, the notion of *unchanging* things has been relegated to the absolute highest status. God is eternal and unchanging. According to this view, some of us can become permanent—godlike—unlike everything else in this “defective” world.

When we add this notion of change (as a result of the impermanent nature of reality) to the idea of relational origination, we end up with an ontology based on change, movement, and fluidity, rather than the traditional Western framework that is based on something external to us (God), our world, our time, and is forever *unchanging*. As we shall see, the notion of relational origination itself is also in opposition to traditional Western philosophical views of the nature of reality.

The Buddhist doctrine of relational origination holds that all things come to be interdependently and thus are interconnected with each other. As noted earlier, James agrees with this doctrine insofar as he states that the relations themselves have the same reality as the things. The Buddhist goes further and asserts that removal or denial of the relations render the “object” in question a mere shadow of itself. Actually, Buddhists assert that removal or lack of relations would result in actual emptiness. This is often referred to as the “other side” of relational origination. If there are no relations, there is

---

<sup>5</sup> These doctrines are suffering, impermanence, non-self, samsara, nirvana, the middle way, emptiness, karman, relational origination, wisdom, and compassion.

nothing.<sup>6</sup> It is important here to note that this notion of an “other” side is *not* dualistic. Emptiness is merely relational origination seen from a different perspective.<sup>7</sup>

So, to put this more simply, we can say that according to Buddhists relations between things are ontologically as significant as any “discrete” object of our perception. The relations in reference are *all* relations that exist and are critical to the existence of anything. This is a notion very foreign to traditional Western philosophical systems that value the individual, discrete entity above and over all else. In terms of human individuals, this is usually understood to mean that a person (obviously) has more value than her environment, or any other thing in it.

The doctrine of relational origination holds that things do not exist and never have existed (or will exist for that matter) independently of one another. Tom Kasulis states that in Zen Buddhism “the context is given primacy over the individual; the context defines and elaborates the individual rather than vice versa”(8). In effect, the Buddhist view reverses the traditional Western philosophical position, a position that locates absolute “being” in entities and tends to see individual substances as the primary building blocks of experience.<sup>8</sup>

An example illustrates the difference between the Western and Eastern view nicely. A traditional Western philosophical approach to defining a person would likely begin with a physical description of the body of an individual. Personality traits and mental characteristics might then be added to complete the description. Together these details would serve to identify the person as unique from others.<sup>9</sup> While the Buddhist recognizes uniqueness, the Buddhist approach emphasizes the relations a person has and defines the person primarily through those relations. In other words, Buddhists assert that we are who we are because of the connections that exist between us and by virtue of relations including, but by no means limited to, our parents, spouses, friends, and environment. If these relations were altered, quite literally a different person would exist as a result of these changes. This certainly sounds reminiscent of the traditional way that many Native Americans introduce themselves, and we will certainly discuss this similarity shortly.

---

<sup>6</sup> In this sense Buddhists differ from the Ancient Greeks and possibly Native thought because the notion of something coming from nothing is less problematic for them. While it may seem counter-intuitive, there is no actual distinction between emptiness and relational origination. In reality they are concomitant.

<sup>7</sup> See Kenneth Inada, *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, pp. 233-38 for an excellent discussion of this phenomenon which he describes “awkwardly” as “the principle of parity of existence” or “the parity principle of existence.”

<sup>8</sup> Atomistic models are particularly illustrative of the traditional Western view. Admittedly, while atomistic models vary, to the extent they contend that all existing things are comprised of, and can be reduced to, particles of discrete types (particles which are themselves irreducible), these models maintain that there are essential substances that are the foundation of reality.

<sup>9</sup> I realize that this is an oversimplification of extremely complex processes that occur in various Western philosophical traditions. I am also aware that there are exceptions to this “rule,” process philosophy and some schools of feminism come to mind. I simply want to point out that the orientation in terms of a both the starting point and emphasis is quite different with respect to a Western versus a Buddhist approach.

If one accepts the notion of relational origination as a reasonable way to understand experiential reality, then a significant shift occurs with respect to understanding what a thing is. Suddenly the notion of a thing must be understood as one that is extremely fluid.<sup>10</sup> Keeping with the example used previously, rather than assert that individual identity remains constant, a Buddhist instead argues that who and what a person is changes constantly. Granted, many of these changes are imperceptible and it often takes a great many changes for them to be noticeable, but sometimes (say for example in the case of divorce or a death) just one change in relations can have devastating (or equally positive) effects on who someone is, or will become. At this point it should be easy to see how impermanence is unequivocally tied to relational origination. Impermanence is a necessary consequence of relational origination. If the “essence” of a thing is truly fluid, then it cannot remain in stasis. If it cannot remain the same, then it cannot exist in any permanent way, and thus we arrive back at the Buddhist notion of impermanence, where we find the dynamism of relational origination highlighted.

At this point I must turn my attention to Native thought. Clearly one of the first issues that has to be addressed is the fact that there existed so many different tribes (and so many still exist) that it may seem as though it would be difficult to find philosophical elements common to all. In opposition to this potential problem, Native philosopher Viola Cordova has written that “there are spread throughout the Americas, some similar concepts that allow one to speak of Native American thought *in general*” (3). Certainly Cordova is correct in saying this, as the same approach must be used in the philosophical study of Christianity, Buddhism, Asian thought more generally, and many other broad areas of philosophical interest.

Two of these “similar concepts” that I shall focus upon are what Cordova refers to as indigenous metaphysics, and a Native American’s role and place in that metaphysical view. I would argue that taking both of these together results in an examination of a Native American ontology, what it means for a native thinker to be in this world.

Most Native American philosophers assert that the earth is seen as the mother from which human beings came. As Cordova states,

Man was created by the earth and belongs to the earth. He does not think of or postulate another or “better” home. The belief that man is rightfully created by the earth, for the earth, does not however provide an excuse for complacency. The Indian knows that he is dependent on the earth, but he realizes also that he exists in a reciprocal relationship with the mother. (116)

Cordova is simultaneously introducing Native philosophy here and contrasting it to Western views of the earth where humans are seen as care takers, or stewards of an alien world. She is absolutely correct in her critique of traditional Western philosophy,

---

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that Heraclitus recognized long ago that it is not possible to step twice into the same river, but it never became a prominent feature of Western thought.

and it is hopefully apparent at this point that pragmatic thinkers such as William James also rejected that dualistic view of the world and people. The Buddhist doctrine of relational origination fits very neatly with what Cordova has claimed as well, in fact it sounds as though she might be speaking of relational origination as she writes that Native Americans see themselves as existing in a web or highly interrelated and interdependent “substances”: air, water, other beings, the land (173).

Both relational origination and Native American thought can be used to illustrate both how people are *of* the earth and why there must be a reciprocal relationship between people and the earth. Perhaps even more to the point, James speaks of the earth as follows:

For, as we are ourselves part of the earth, so our organs are her organs. She is, as it were, eye and ear over her whole extent – all that we see and hear in separation she sees and hears at once. She brings forth living beings of countless kinds upon her surface, and their multitudinous conscious relations with each other she takes up into her higher and more general conscious life (*Pluralistic*, Loc 1135).

Like Native American thinkers, James sees the earth as a more sophisticated life force and it certainly sounds to me as if he views her as sacred as well.

At this point I hope that I am at least sketching some striking similarities that exist between James’ Pragmatism, Buddhism, and Native American views of the world. To go a bit further we need to focus on the person and her relationship to the world and others in it. With respect to the individual, Cordova contrasts the Western notion of the isolated and powerful individual who stands alone (and prefers to do so) to the more socially oriented Native American. She writes that the Native American is “located in a larger whole. It is not the group that threatens the individual, it offers him a sense of belonging; it is instead, the individual that poses a threat to the group’s survival” (Cordova 147).

Elsewhere Cordova speaks of Native Americans as people of the herd or flock, emphasizing that for the Euro-Americans this assessment would be viewed as insulting. However, she argues it is actually a point of strength that Native American thought sees more clearly and understands more thoroughly the interconnection that exists, and must exist, between people. As evident from our examination of both Pragmatism and Buddhism, Native Americans are not alone in acknowledging, not only the factual nature of this view, but the extremely important ramifications of both denying and affirming it.

Understanding the real connections that exist between all things (people included) and the dynamic aspects of those relations results in two very significant philosophical issues, one is epistemic in terms of truth, and the other is ethical in terms of how we ought to act and behave in the world and towards each other. All we have to do is look around to see the results of denying the reality and importance of these connections. The earth is scarred and damaged in so many ways. It really is rather remarkable what people have been able to do to it in such a short period of time. As far as human relations are

concerned, has there been a time in recent history, say the last five hundred years, when people have not been killing each other on a large scale somewhere?

To acknowledge the truths of Native American thought, Pragmatism, and Buddhism means to revise our ways of thinking about what is true and what constitutes knowledge. Native Americans and Pragmatists understand that there cannot be one Truth. As we saw above, for James truth is a moving target that if hit, only necessarily counts that one time. Next time we have to try again, and it may well be a different target that requires a different strategy to hit the mark. Cordova says much the same about truth. She says that there are more likely to be many different truths that are the result of different perspectives. For both Cordova and James, we are the keepers of truth.

For Native Americans, the elders are thought to have more knowledge as they have more experience and knowledge is gained through experience. James would agree and for him those elders would not accept something as true unless it could be verified, corroborated, and assimilated with that which they already had experienced. The ability of Native Americans to survive and thrive on this continent for thousands of years should serve as evidence for the fact that this type of epistemological approach has tremendous value – simply because it worked.

Hopefully, Native American thought will be accepted as a viable approach to some of the problems—so many of them self-inflicted—that we face today. It seems to me that if you can find real ontological agreement from three apparently disparate philosophical sources, then there's got to be something quite worthwhile there that is worthy of further study.

### Works Cited

- Cordova, V. F. *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V. F. Cordova*. Ed. Kathleen Dean Moore, Kurt Peters, Ted Jojola, and Amber Lacy. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007. Print.
- Inada, Kenneth K. "Environmental Problematics." *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*. Ed. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames. Albany: SUNY Press, 1989. Print.
- James, William. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912. Kindle file.
- . *A Pluralistic Universe*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1909. Kindle file.
- . *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Mineola: Dover, 1907. Print.
- Kasulis, Thomas P. *Zen Action, Zen Person*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989. Print.