

Everyday Environmental Ethics as Comedy and Story: A Collage¹

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Abstract

This paper is a collage of voices and ideas that attempts to move us away from an understanding of philosophy as argument and counterargument toward an ecosystemic, or wild, conception of philosophy as story in the mode of comedy.

Résumé

Cet article est un recueil d'opinions et d'idées qui tentent de nous éloigner de notre compréhension de la philosophie fondée sur les arguments et les arguments contraires, et de nous orienter vers la conception d'une philosophie écosystémique ou sauvage, le tout présenté de manière humoristique.

I — The Call of Stories

In “Stories and Theories,” the opening essay in Robert Coles’ (1989) wonderful book *The Call of Stories*, Coles recounts a major turning point (an epiphany, really) early on in his training as a psychiatrist. His mentor, Dr. Alfred A. Ludwig, like a true Zen Master, turned the key at just the right moment when he said:

The people who come to us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember that what we hear is *their story*. (in Coles, 1989, p. 7)

(The reader will have noted that the title of Coles’ essay is “Stories and Theories.”)

I have my students read Aldo Leopold (1970), Gary Snyder (1990), Wendell Berry (1977), and Freeman House (1999) as stories of lives lived—lives lived within larger lives, stories within larger stories—*rather than as arguments in competition with one another*. Stories in relationship to one another behave more like elements of ecosystems than like arguments squaring off against one another. Joseph Meeker suggests that biological life is essentially comedic and that survival may depend upon human conformity to this biological norm. It seems to me that an account of ethics that revisions it along comedic or ecosystemic and evolutionary lines, since it mirrors the very ecosystems that are the concern of environmental ethics, is far more likely

to succeed than an account that is conceptually (and tragically) at odds with that which it would (in the tragic mode) “save.”

As Holmes Rolston (1988) concludes his magisterial *Environmental Ethics*, he is clearly heeding the “call of stories”:

In this last chapter, environmental ethics is not a discovery of theory, not a set of arguments, not a levying of duties, neither rules to keep nor values to conserve. . . . The conclusions we lead toward are not those of arguments but those enacted in stories. (p. 328)

The moral point of view . . . must belong to a person with a proper name who lives in Montana Utah, Newfoundland; on the tall grass prairie or the Cape Cod coastline. . . . *An ethic is . . . a track through the world.* . . . The logic of the home, the ecology, is finally narrative, and the human career will not be a disembodied reason but a person organic in history. Character always takes narrative form; history is required to form character. (p. 349, my emphasis)

[R]ationality inhabits a historical system. The place that is to be counted morally has a history; the ethics that befits such a place will take on historical form; the ethics will itself have a history. . . . The rationality of the ethic . . . will be historical. . . . The move from *is* to *ought*, which logicians have typically thought it their job to solve before any naturalistic ethics could be judged sound, is transformed into movement along a story line. (p. 341-2)

In his foreword to *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold (1970)—in a variant of Plato’s idea of the unity of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful—adds the aesthetic to Rolston’s (1988) notion of the movement from *is* to *ought* as occurring along a story line. “These essays,” Leopold says, “attempt to weld these three concepts”:

That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics. That land yields a cultural harvest is a fact long known, but latterly often forgotten. (p. xix)³

It has been suggested (Cheney, 1991, 1998; Cheney & Weston, 1999) that the movement between these dimensions of knowledge is not a one-way street, as Rolston’s “*is* to *ought*” suggests; rather, they are dynamically interrelated. Knowledge itself has descriptive, aesthetic, and moral dimensions. Knowledge, with these dimensions (and others, no doubt), emerges within wild systems and is itself wild, ecosystemic. But, it must be added, knowledge within human culture, though essentially comedic, can (to our sorrow) assume the shape of tragedy. Joseph Meeker (1997) states the connection between literary tragedy and environmental crisis as follows:

[L]iterary tragedy and environmental exploitation in Western culture share many of the same philosophical presuppositions. Neither tragedy nor environmental crisis could have developed as they have without the interweaving of a few basic ideas that have attained in the Western tradition an importance far greater than they carry in other cultures.

Three such ideas will illustrate the point: [1] the assumption that nature exists for the benefit of humanity, [2] the belief that human morality transcends natural limitations, and [3] humanism's insistence upon the supreme importance of the individual personality. (p. 24)

With the understanding that the tragic dimension of our environmental situation runs deep and must be understood as a *spiritual* affliction, it is time to enter the world of comedy, which also runs deep—deep into our *biological* being:

Evolution proceeds as an unscrupulous, opportunistic comedy, the object of which appears to be the proliferation and preservation of as many life forms as possible. Successful participants in it are those who live and reproduce even when times are hard or dangerous, not those who are best able to destroy enemies or competitors. Its ground rules for participants, including people, are those that govern literary comedy: Organisms must adapt themselves to their circumstances in every possible way, must studiously avoid all-or-nothing choices, must seek alternatives to death, must accept and revel in maximum diversity, must accommodate themselves to the accidental limitations of birth and environment, and must prefer cooperation to competition, yet compete successfully when necessary. . . . The comic way is to be found in evolutionary history, in the processes of ecology, and in comic literature, which may represent the closest we have come to describing humans as adaptive animals. Comedy illustrates that survival depends upon our ability to change ourselves rather than our environment. . . . Comedy is a strategy for living that contains ecological wisdom, and it may be one of our best guides as we try to retain a place for ourselves among the other animals that live according to the comic way. (Meeker, 1997, p. 20-21)

Comedy surrounds us. It is abundant in our daily lives. It does not require rigorous spiritual discipline. It requires only that we remain the adaptive critters we are, that we appreciate the survival value, the power of comedy, that we not get caught up in the melodrama, the literally *dead* end of tragedy.

II — Comedy: The Lessons of Community

To maintain a viable comic community three things are required. First, the members of the community must understand themselves as *fundamentally* members of the community. Second, the community must understand itself as *fundamentally* rooted in a particular place. Third, the community of place must have the *flexibility* of comedy.

The first point is clear enough, I think. One must have a defining relationship to the community. A Hobbesian “community” formed by a social contract between self-interested parties for the exclusive promotion of the individual interests of the contracting parties is not a comic community. Such is the “community” of Economic Man as understood in contemporary economic theory. To the extent that public policy is the result of attempts to satisfy the

special interest factions of the “community” by appeal to the demands of distributive justice, neither that policy nor that community is comic.

The requirement that the community be a community of place is a necessary condition of understanding the individual who lives and breathes and has its being in wider circles of community. As Wendell Berry (1977) puts it, “kindly use” depends upon the individual being nested in human community, the human community being nested in agriculture (i.e., human *use* of the community of life) and agriculture being nested in wildness. The economy of such nested communities in relationship to one another is a *gift* economy.

The Lakota have it that the *nagi*, one of the spiritual dimensions of the human being (*all* beings, really), which “retains the idiosyncrasies of the . . . personality” can be “capricious and unpredictable” (Amiotte, 1992, p. 166). Vine Deloria, Jr. (Dakota) adds, “Coming last, human beings were the ‘younger brothers’ of the other life-forms and therefore had to learn everything from these creatures” (in Deloria, Foehner, & Scinta, 1999, p. 50). To achieve balance, to temper human capriciousness and unpredictability, Lakota forged alliances with the *nagi* of other beings in the vision quest. The individual had a responsibility to honor kinship relationships and prevent outbreaks of selfishness (the Trickster in all of us), on the one hand, and, on the other, to act as conduit for the power of *nagi* allies into the community (Amiotte, 1992, p. 169; Rice, 1998, p. 84-86).

The flexibility requirement. Lewis Hyde wrote two books: *The Gift* (1983) and *Trickster Makes this World* (1998). The point was this: (1) The glue that holds a true community together is the Gift: communities must, at a fundamental level, function as gift economies; and (2) communities must not be locked into rigid self-definitions, must not lock individuals into preconceived roles, and must be flexible, adapting to changing situations and changing individuals within the community. Tricksters (one aspect of Trickster, that is) and clowns keep the Gift fluid and flowing. Tricksters and clowns are boundary crossers; they define and redefine boundaries in the interest of community and individual well-being. Years ago a search and screen committee, charged with the task of making recommendations among available candidates for the position of Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin Colleges, invited suggestions from the faculty. I immediately wrote back, making two suggestions. First, I recommended that the proposed salary for the Chancellor be cut in half, the point being that the proposed salary would likely induce hubris, making bureaucratic management of teaching seem more important than teaching. The second recommendation was to use the remaining money to hire a clown or, if possible, an entire clown society to do the job that Pueblo clowns had always done, namely, to assure comic flexibility at the boundaries (Tedlock, 1992; Cheney, 2003). I appended various articles to my letter to the committee extolling the importance of clowns in indigenous cultures. The chair of the search committee duly made my letter available to the committee, and that was the end of it.

American Indian epistemology can provide Western culture invaluable lessons in comic flexibility. In this journal, philosopher Jim Cheney has recently attempted to articulate a First Nations epistemology (Cheney, 2002; see also Hester and Cheney, 2001; Hickory, 1995) upon which I draw here. It is usual for social scientists to understand what they call Indian “worldviews” as *belief systems*. This is a mistake. So-called worldviews in Indian country are better understood as *stories*—flexible, revisable, action-guiding stories. They are stories tied down to experience and patterns discerned in experience, certainly, but experience is gathered, patterns in experience discerned, in accordance with certain epistemological principles, moral in nature. The fundamental epistemological principle is related to the fact that:

The real interest of the old Indians was not to discover the abstract structure of physical reality but rather to find the proper road along which, for the duration of a person’s life, individuals were supposed to walk. (Deloria et al., 1999, p. 46)

The old Indians . . . were interested in finding the proper moral and ethical road upon which human beings should walk. All knowledge, if it is to be useful, was directed toward that goal. Absent in this approach was the idea that knowledge existed apart from human beings and their communities, and could stand alone for “its own sake.” In the Indian conception, it was impossible that there could be abstract propositions that could be used to explore the structure of the physical universe. (Deloria et al., 1999, p. 43-44)

Within this moral framework, other epistemological principles were used (sometimes called “principles of epistemological method” by Vine Deloria). One such principle, for the Lakota, is “we are all relatives,” about which Deloria says that it “is very important as a practical methodological tool for investigating the natural world and drawing conclusions about it that can serve as guides for understanding nature and living comfortably within it” (Deloria et al., 1999, p. 34). Another principle is that “the universe is alive” (Deloria et al., 1999, p. 49-52). The idea is that if we experience the world through these epistemological lenses we will come to discern patterns in experience that are action-guiding in the moral sense and have survival value—which, in the Indian context, means living fully, not merely staying alive (Beck, Walters, & Francisco, 1990, p. 47).

Perhaps if we in the West adopted such epistemological principles, it could be said of us what Aldo Leopold (1970) said of two farmers who planted a truck full of young tamarack trees in the marsh on their farm:

Perhaps they wish for their land what we all wish for our children—not only a chance to make a living but also a chance to express and develop a rich and varied assortment of inherent capabilities, both wild and tame. What better expresses the land than the plants that originally grew on it? (p. 203)

Perhaps, if we lived the moral epistemology Deloria points to, we would be able to act on Brave Buffalo's recommendation:

I have noticed that all men have a liking for some special animal, tree, plant, or spot of earth. If men would pay more attention to these preferences and seek what is best to do to make themselves worthy of that toward which they are so attracted, they might have dreams which would purify their lives. (in House, 1999, p. 54)

III — Comedy: The Lessons of the Wild

The picaresque world is a natural system in which humans are one of the animal species. The picaro suffers from no conflict between society and nature simply because he sees society as one of the many forms of natural order. He objects to the society into which he is born no more than wolves or ants or whales object to theirs, and like these animals, he tries merely to adapt himself to his circumstances in the interest of his own survival. . . . Picaresque nature is not a garden, but a wilderness. Its most obvious features are multiplicity and diversity, for within the picaresque world everything is tied to everything else according to complex interdependencies that defy simplification. (Meeker, 1997, p. 58-59)

When times permit more than defensive strategies, the picaro's motto is that of Felix Krull in Thomas Mann's *Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man*: "He who really loves the world shapes himself to please it" (in Meeker, 1997, p. 66). Listen to the "Native Africans" of Dinesen's (1985) colonial imagination in *Out of Africa*:

Natives, if they are not paralyzed and benumbed by their terror of the unknown, growl and grumble much in hospital, and invent schemes for getting away. Death is one of these; they do not fear it. The Europeans who have built and equipped the hospitals, and who are working in them, and have with much trouble got the patients dragged there, complain with bitterness that the Natives know nothing of gratitude, and that it is the same what you do to them.

To white people there is something vexatious and mortifying in this state of mind in the Natives. It is indeed the same what you do to them; you can do but little, and what you do disappears, and will never be heard of again; they do not thank you, and they bear you no malice, and even should you want to, you cannot do anything about it. It is an alarming quality; it seems to annul your existence as an individual human being, and to inflict upon you a role not of your own choosing, as if you were a phenomenon in Nature, as if you were the weather. . . .

. . . [T]he unprejudiced Kikuyu, Wakambas, or Kavirondos . . . have it that most people are capable of most things, and you cannot shock them if you want to. It is, it can be said, a poor or perverted Kikuyu, to whom it makes any difference what you do to him. Left to their own nature, and to the tradition of their nation, they will look upon our activities as upon those of nature. They judge you not, but they are keen observers. The sum of their observations is what you pass for with them, your good or bad name. (p. 133-134)

We can learn much from picaresque strategies. The picaro jumps altogether outside the polarization of good and evil central to tragedy. This is edifying. Many, perhaps most, environmentalists, when push comes to shove, are as polarized in their views as those they fight. Paul Shepard (1982) has said, in *Nature and Madness*, that those who would “save the world” are simply on the other side of the same coin from those who would treat the world solely as a cluster of resources for human well-being—that coin being minted of those who understand themselves as superior to the nonhuman world, whether as ruthless exploiter or as savior. Fighting fire with fire, in this case, just might spell disaster. Environmentalists should *exemplify* their values—that would be the comic way, as opposed to pitting value against value. My blue-collar heritage, my stint in the U. S. Marine Corps, my season working as a high lead logger for International Paper in western Washington state, and my many visits with Wallace and Marlene Reid at their ranch on Idaho’s Blackfoot River have taught me that the human world is much more complex than simple polarized views would have it. “We interdependently co-arise with one another” should perhaps be our koan when we set ourselves above others.

Early in “The Etiquette of Freedom” Gary Snyder (1990) says that among the “lessons of the wild” are these:

Coyote and Ground Squirrel do not break the compact they have with each other that one must play predator and the other play game. . . . We can appreciate the elegance of the forces that shape life and the world, that have shaped every line of our bodies. . . . We also see that we must try to live without causing unnecessary harm, not just to fellow humans but to all beings. We must try not to be stingy, or to exploit others. (p. 4)

The first two, of course, are lessons of (in the first case) co-evolution and (in the second) what Snyder calls (reversing “background and foreground”) environmental conditions bringing species into existence: the world as it was called forth “every line of our bodies” (p. 109). The lessons concerning unnecessary harm, stinginess, and exploitation are different. Taking the nonhuman world as exemplary, we can plausibly reduce human moral failings to those mentioned by Snyder. Moral theories, I think, try to work their way out from clearly problematic behavior to a theory of the good. Snyder’s reversal of this procedure seems clearly preferable. So much, I think, for Socrates’ thought that we can learn nothing from the countryside.

Snyder (1990) amplifies his views on the “lessons of the wild” later in “The Etiquette of Freedom”:

An ethical life is one that is mindful, mannerly, and has style. Of all moral failings and flaws of character, the worst is stinginess of thought, which includes meanness in all its forms. Rudeness in thought or deeds towards others, toward nature, reduces the chances of conviviality and interspecies communication, which are essential to physical and spiritual survival. (p. 21)

For a species such as ourselves, a species that can contemplate its behavior, it is perhaps best to think of ethics as a matter of etiquette, best to get off our high horses and think of the ethical project as one of getting on with our neighbors, finding our responsibilities within the community of life.

Snyder's (1990) final take on the "lessons of the wild" in "The Etiquette of Freedom" is to my mind beyond praise:

The lessons we learn from the wild become the etiquette of freedom.⁴ We can enjoy our humanity with its flashy brains and sexual buzz, its social cravings and stubborn tantrums, and take ourselves as no more and no less than another being in the Big Watershed. We can accept each other as barefoot equals sleeping on the same ground. We can give up hoping to be eternal and quit fighting dirt. We can chase off mosquitoes and fence out varmints without hating them. No expectations, alert and sufficient, grateful and careful, generous and direct. A calm and clarity attend us in the moment we are wiping the grease off our hands between tasks and glancing up at the passing clouds. Another joy is finally sitting down to have coffee with a friend. The wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford the streams and cross the ridges, and tell a good story when we get back home. (p. 24)

Sitting around the campfire with Tom Birch and Anthony Weston while backpacking in the Lemhi Range of east-central Idaho some years ago, Anthony asked why it is that we need to get out in big wilderness on a regular basis. After awhile Tom said in his usual aphoristic way, "wilderness treats me like a human being." I thought about this for a year or two and came up with the following thoughts (which Tom, enigmatic as always, said were "part" of what he meant). Wilderness is our fundamental caretaker. In relationship to our basic needs for food, air, water, warmth, shelter, and other basics, the wild world is clearly our primary caretaker; our parents and others merely deliver the gifts that wildness provides. Wilderness cares for us as we need to be cared for. Wilderness is also our primary teacher. What we need to know nature teaches us, if we have the patience and presence of mind to pay attention. Human teachers are able to pass this teaching on to us, but (1) wildness is nonetheless our primary teacher and (2) wildness respects, as human teachers too often do not, our ability to learn, to pay close attention to the wildness that is our home, the wildness that called us into existence as the species we are (Snyder, 1990, p. 109). Wilderness doesn't manipulate us, does not jerk us around, confirming in us the immaturity that manipulation and condescension bring. Wilderness provides a clear example of full maturity. As Thoreau (1854) puts it,

After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what—how—when—where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on her lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight. The snow lying deep on the earth dotted with young pines, and the very slope of the

hill on which my house is placed, seemed to say, Forward! Nature puts no question and answers none which we mortals ask. She has long ago taken her resolution. (Thoreau, the first lines of "The Pond in Winter")

The paragraph in *Walden* that immediately follows the above begins: "Then to my morning work. First I take an axe and pail and go in search of water." With the reminder of what morning means to Thoreau—e.g., "I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did" and "Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me" (paragraph 14 of "Where I lived, and What I Lived For")—the resonance with the following koan from the *Mumonkan* is clear:

Once a monk made a request of Joshu. "I have just entered the monastery," he said. "Please give me instructions, Master." Joshu said, "Have you had your breakfast?" "Yes, I have," replied the monk. "Then," said Joshu, "wash your bowls." The monk had an insight. (Shibayama, 1974, p. 69)

IV — Weather Report from Raven House

We humans are fundamentally comic critters, but we need to gain more clarity about our comic selves so that we think of ourselves as just other beings in the "Big Watershed," just "plain member[s] and citizen[s]" of the biotic community. It is a tough challenge, and it remains to be seen whether comedy can withstand the current onslaught of tragedy. I happen to think that it can. I am heartened by Gary Snyder's (1990) vow: "[I]f the secret heart [of the Growth-Monster] stays secret and our work is made no easier, I for one will keep working for wildness day by day" (p. 5). Meanwhile, we can abide, deep rooted and comic, with the poet Nanao Sakaki who said, after listening to a group of environmentalists in a state of near-doomsday frenzy trying to figure how to respond to an impending environmental disaster, "No need to survive" (in conversation with Gary Snyder at Wilderness University); or with Tlingit elder Austin Hammond, who spoke at Raven House "of empires and civilizations in metaphors of glaciers," describing "how great alien forces—industrial civilization in this case—advance and retreat, and how settled people can wait it out" (in Snyder, 1990, p. 38-39), or with the Africans of Dinesen's (1985) colonial imagination who, she interprets, would regard the West's inclination toward the tragic as just another weather system moving through.

Notes

- ¹ This article is dedicated to Wallace and Marlene Reid, whose lives give rich expression to the "comedy of survival" along the Blackfoot River in southeastern

Idaho, and to Mandi Wheatley, teacher and friend, who takes comedy—*dare I say?—seriously*. Now she has married a Trickster. What next?

- 2 As John Muir put it, “I left the Wisconsin University for the Wilderness University.”
- 3 Philosophers refer to “thick moral concepts,” concepts that inextricably bind together moral and descriptive content. We can think of Leopold as invoking a broader concept: that of “thick evaluative concepts”—concepts that bind descriptive, aesthetic, and moral content.
- 4 Early in “The Etiquette of Freedom” Snyder defines “free” in Buddhist fashion as follows: “To be truly free one must take on the basic conditions as they are—painful, impermanent, open, imperfect—and then be grateful for impermanence and the freedom it grants us” (p. 5).

Notes on Contributor

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