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# Indigenizing Morality through the Land: Decolonizing Environmental Thought and Indigenous Futures



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## Black Elk

Iktomi was a man in the early days, just like any person. He was the first who attained maturity in this world. He is more cunning than human beings. He names all people and animals, and he was the first to use human speech. Even toward the supernatural monsters, Spider demonstrates this arrogance, establishing himself as the Creator himself: "I made this earth and the sky and the sun and the moon and everything. You are one of the things I made. You were a little grey thing and I threw you away."

—Black Elk

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## Iktomi

Iktomi is a little one. His body is like a fat bug. His legs are like the spider's, but he had hands and feet like a man. He talks with men and beast and with everything that lives and with trees and stones. He plays tricks on beasts and birds. He can make himself invisible. He is weak, and he must get things by his tricks.

—Old Horse

[Iktomi] can make himself appear like an old man. When an old man comes to a lodge, he should be watched. If he proposes a game, then it is Iktomi. [If you feed him], he will dung in [your] lodge.

—Old Horse

Iktomi is of the oldest. He is full of tricks. He plays his pranks on the Wakan and on the Lakotas. He would go into their lodges and . . . persuade them to scatter about everywhere . . . [and] would laugh at them. . . . So the Lakotas came together in one camp like they were in the middle of the world. . . . [They] made their camp in a circle so that each door would be toward the door of every other lodge, [so] if Iktomi came into a lodge, everyone would know about it.

—Old Horse

Should I think with my stomach or go hungry?

—Iktomi

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## Iktomi Challenges the Western Thinker to a Trickster Contest

Even Iktomi had noticed that his own stories were circular.

Those who listened to Iktomi's stories often seemed trapped in the same webs that Iktomi spun around himself. But sometimes the listener, in trying to follow Iktomi's journey, can unravel the circle of webs altogether. What seems natural to Iktomi and his followers (the listener) lead, in the stories, to a series of choices that culminate in a forked path, an ultimate either/or. The binary choices as presented in the stories are shaped by deeper and subtler choices that have falsely locked Iktomi and his followers into this binary position. Just as Marty Two Bulls Sr. articulated, a seemingly simple choice between binary oppositions can reveal a deeper choice between paths of delocality

and locality. Neither of the choices that Iktomi and his followers are ultimately presented reveal meaningful paths to follow, but it is the naturalness of the choices and the choosing process that begins to reveal to Iktomi and his followers just how deeply the choices and the choosing process are rooted in delocality.

Iktomi's stories are meant to be circular. His stories do not describe his actions or attitudes in the best light but rather present his path and his choices in a natural light to the listener. The listener is then able to see the naturalness of the choice but also the difficulty of following the path of that choice within the context of the choices and the choosing process. This reveals new possibilities of thinking for the listener that go beyond the naturalness of the ultimate forked path that is presented. In what follows, Iktomi tells an Iktomi story about Western notions of value and the land that does not present these ideas in the best light, but rather presents the choices that lead to the ultimate forked path in the most natural light to the listener. Iktomi decided that it was about time that someone else was Iktomi for a while. He had been doing the job for as long as he could remember. Here is part I of Iktomi's version of the story of the Western Thinker/trickster and the Western understanding of land and value.

### The Western Thinker Meets the Last Man and Tries to Find Value in the Land

—from the philosophy of Iktomi

The Western Thinker always places the ultimate value upon himself, and upon human beings in general. He never wonders whether anything else has value. He rarely even wonders whether he has any obligations

to anything other than human beings. If he did momentarily wonder, he generally ends that moment of wonder with a resounding and final no. Human beings have intrinsic value.

Iktomi thinks that the Western Thinker would make a better Iktomi than Iktomi, as he is better at only seeing himself and the world as a mirror of himself than any other trickster in history. Iktomi wonders if the Western Thinker was patting himself on the back while he reached for this conclusion.

Intrinsic value is the value of something just for being what it is. It is value in itself. Instrumental value, on the other hand, is the value that something has as a means to an end. For example, corn, presumably, has value as a means for human sustenance. The Western Thinker needs to eat and so finds the corn to have value relative to that end. But the corn has no value in itself. Moral obligation follows directly from intrinsic value in the mind of the Western Thinker. Since the Western Thinker assigns instrumental value to nonhumans (animals, rocks, trees, ecosystems, and the like), any expense to nonhumans that will bring benefit to humans is justified. This is one sense in which the Western Thinker is anthropocentric. Aristotle classically articulates a natural anthropocentric hierarchy in which the less rational and less perfect serves the more rational and more perfect: “nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man” (*Politics* bk.1, ch. 8). According to the Bible, “God created man in his own image . . . [to] replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over fish of the sea, and over fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:27–28). Thomas Aquinas also believes humans can use nonhumans in any way they see fit, even unto death,

without the possibility of injustice, since all nonhumans are “ordered to man’s use” (*Summa Contra Gentiles* bk.3, pt. 2, ch. 112). Following the Western Thinker, one would have trouble finding anything wrong with even the ugliest cruelty to anything nonhuman except insofar as this cruelty has negative effects on human beings. Immanuel Kant, for instance, suggests that cruelty toward a dog might lead to a character that is less sensitive to human cruelty. The wrongness, in this case, of animal cruelty is determined solely by a relation to intrinsically valuable humans (Kant 1967).

Iktomi wonders why anyone would continue to listen to the Western Thinker after displaying such trickster logic (thinking that presented oneself as both the justification and conclusion of an argument). People have been ignoring Iktomi since time immemorial for just this reason.

In the 1970s, the Western Thinker was presented with an environmental crisis. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) detailed the possible relationship between pesticide use and commercial farming practices (aiming solely at crop yield) and environmental devastation and deteriorating public health. Books like *The Population Bomb* (1968) warned that current growth of human population was set to undermine planetary life support, and *The Limits to Growth* (1972) from MIT affirmed “finally that any deliberate attempt to reach a rational and enduring state of equilibrium by planned measures, rather than by chance or catastrophe, must ultimately be founded on a basic change of values and goals at individual, national and world levels” (Meadows 1972, 112). The Western Thinker began to wonder whether he had been wrong to assume that

the nonhuman world did not have intrinsic value or at least some value that approximated the intrinsic value that humans had by definition and default. The Western Thinker was pushed toward a change of values, a reformulation of ethics. John Muir creates “American conservation” and Aldo Leopold creates the “land ethic” and advocated the conservation of things “natural, wild, and free.” These values of conservation and preservation arise from both an aesthetic response to nature as well as an ethical response to the purely economic approach to the value of the environment. Leopold’s “land ethic,” as first articulated in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), makes the claim that the land is “a community . . . to be loved and respected” (1949, 224). His formulation is as follows: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Leopold 1949, 224–225).

Iktomi thinks it is classic trickster logic to only begin to question one’s thinking when one is faced with a life-threatening crisis.

One Western Thinker put forth the “last man” thought experiment, which was an attempt to challenge the Western Thinker’s refusal to grant intrinsic value to nonhumans. This Western Thinker imagines a situation where the last person left on earth behaved in such a way as to ensure that nothing would be left after his passing. Since his final destruction of everything would harm no humans, the last man ought to be free from all moral judgment. But the last man would be acting morally wrong with his last act. What is destroyed by the last man’s last act has intrinsic value that is independent of its possible human use. The last man is trying to show the Western Thinker that his thinking cannot account for this value.

Iktomi thinks the Western Thinker could care less about what happens in a world where there were no longer any human beings around.

### Arne Næss created “deep ecology.”

Iktomi thinks Arne Næss appropriated the Sherpa culture of reverence for the Himalayas. Iktomi thinks Næss “transparently sensed” the reverence the Sherpas had for those mountains and extended through delocality this reverence to cover natural objects in general.

Deep ecology endorses “biospheric egalitarianism,” the view that all life has a value in its own right (Næss 1973, 99). One ought to take care, according to deep ecology, when even walking through a forest, for example, not to cause unnecessary damage to the plants that live there.

Iktomi thinks this is good advice, particularly when it comes to stepping on spiders.

Næss also develops what he calls the “relational, total-field image” (1973, 99). Organisms are seen as “knots” in the biospheric web. The identity of an individual organism is defined in terms of its relation to the other organisms. One’s morality can be transformed by identifying oneself with nature. If I am nature, then respect for nature is just another form of self-respect. The Western Thinker worries that deep ecology is nothing more than an extension of utilitarianism that counted human interests alongside the interests of all living things (trees, flowers, rivers, bears). The Western Thinker also does not think that organisms could have interests

of any relevant moral sense at all. Without having interests in a moral sense, the Western Thinker says, nonhumans cannot have moral standing.

Corn doesn't have interests and so has no moral standing, the Western Thinker concludes.

Iktomi wonders if the Western Thinker reached this conclusion about corn while he was in the process of killing and eating this plant in order to sustain his life.

Some Western Thinker claims that beings that have no language cannot be said to have interests.

Iktomi says that this Western Thinker has never spoken with Selu, the corn mother, or Inyan, the grandfather stone.

Another Western Thinker claims that beings who do not have mental states cannot have interests. The Western Thinker says that desires are more than instincts. A desire is a "special kind of learning involved in hypothesis formation and testing" (Varner 1998, 29). The "capacity for conscious practical reasoning" grounds desire and provides the capacity for having interests of any kind (Varner 39). This Western Thinker points to neurophysiological evidence that suggests that the capacity for practical reasoning is localized in the prefrontal cortex (Varner 1998, 42).

Iktomi says that this Western Thinker was not taught how to be a human being by Selu, the corn mother. Selu has no prefrontal cortex but epitomizes practical reason. Iktomi wants to remind the Western

Thinker that Selu deduced that her two sons were going to kill her when she showed them that she could produce corn and beans for them to eat by rubbing her stomach.

The Western Thinker is wont to allow interests and moral standing beyond himself. A few mammals is about as far as he is willing to go. Some Western Thinker also thinks that corn might have “needs” in a way that machines have “biological functions” (Varner 1998, 68). If biological functions can be thought of as creating needs, it seems that mechanical functions could be thought of as creating needs just as well, which means that Western Thinkers would also have to say that not only corn has interests and moral standing but cars might have interests and so moral standing.

Iktomi says that he has met plenty of cars that have moral standing, so wonders why the Western Thinker finds that fact to vitiate this one Western Thinker’s view.

Some Western Thinker claims that it is being in something’s interests that creates value and moral standing. Corn can have interest in the sense that there are states of affairs that are objectively good for the corn. Inanimate objects, this Western Thinker claims, do not have interests. An object of this sort, such as a stone, “has no good of its own. A stone cannot be benefited or harmed by acting according or contrary to its welfare” (Taylor 1986, 121).

Iktomi says that he hopes no one tells Inyan, the stone grandfather, about this. Inyan would likely have his feelings hurt, and then things

could get real messy in the next sweat lodge. Besides, it seems arbitrary or even prejudicial to want to limit the extension of the human realm of value to not include cars and stones. I've seen many actions that do harm to the stone grandfathers, and I have a dozen broken-down cars behind my house, Iktomi says.

The Western Thinker does not want anything other than other humans to have interests and so moral standing. Some will say that only the experience of pain can account for intrinsic value. Feeling pain and pleasure is seen by some as necessary for possessing intrinsic value and extend intrinsic value beyond the realm of humans (Singer 1990, 17–21).

Iktomi thinks this criterion is useless unless the Western Thinker would stop assuming that Selu and Inyan are nonsentient. If Selu did not feel pleasure or pain, then why did she tell her sons that it was acceptable for them to kill her in order for her body to produce the life-sustaining corn for all the generations that followed? If Inyan did not feel pleasure or pain then why did he choose to cut himself open to release his blue blood, the water that became the lifeblood of the earth and was responsible for the generation of human beings in the first place?

Some Western Thinkers see interests as a generalization of the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. According to one Western Thinker: “if I am my neighbor, I might not want a certain tree cut down because it provides shade for my yard or if I am a squirrel, I might not want this tree cut down because it provides food, but if I am

this tree, it can no more matter to me than if I am the bicycle that I knock over” (Hare 1989, 244). The tree and the bicycle have interests in that one can harm them by cutting down the tree or knocking over the bicycle, but neither can have interests of the sort that generate moral obligation since, from the perspective of the tree, I will not care whether I am cut down, and from the perspective of the bicycle, I will not care whether I am knocked down.

Iktomi thinks that the Western Thinker seems to know as much about trees and bicycles as he does about Selu and Inyan.

The Western Thinker is rejecting the various extensions of interests beyond human beings on the basis of the claim that the value of a tree, a stone, corn, or a bicycle is a value based in what is in something’s interest rather than being an interest for that thing. One Western Thinker claims that the only kind of value that creates moral standing is value of a life in terms of “how well it is going for the individual whose life it is” (Sumner 1996, 20). The Western Thinker thinks that interests, intrinsic value, and so moral standing all seem to arise from the perspective of a thing, and if no interests can be found from the perspective of a thing, then no interests, and so no intrinsic value ought to be ascribed.

Iktomi thinks the Western Thinker has used his own trickster logic to argue himself into oblivion or at least isolation and solitude. Iktomi wonders why the Western Thinker would be proud of his own reason and its conclusion when they seem to both arise from and end in his own narcissism.

The Western Thinker wants to deny the intuition of the last man. He does not want to allow anything but instrumental value for the nonhuman world. The Western Thinker wants to limit the value of the nonhuman world to human-centered, instrumental value. The Western Thinker wants to think about the value of the nonhuman world within a pragmatic anthropocentrism, where the value of nature lies in its relation to the good life or human well-being. One Western Thinker reminds us, “an obscure moth from Latin America saved Australia’s pastureland from overgrowth by cactus,” and “the rosy periwinkle provided the cure for Hodgkin’s disease and childhood lymphocytic leukemia” (Wilson 1999, 38).

Iktomi wonders whether the Western Thinker has just followed his own trickster logic back to the same place where he started. Isn’t he now back standing next to Aristotle facing the original question: Why is value human-centered?