

APA Newsletters

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NEWSLETTER ON INDIGENOUS PHILOSOPHY

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FROM THE EDITOR

This year the Committee on Indigenous Philosophers enjoyed two successful symposiums during the March 30-April 2 Central Division Meeting in Minneapolis. The sessions featured a symposium on Environmental Justice and Indigenous Peoples along with one celebrating the late Vine Deloria, Jr.

This year also brings a number of changes to our committee membership. Brian Burkhart (brian.burkhart@csun.edu) replaced Thomas Norton Smith as Committee Chair; Shay Welch replaced Lee Hester, with Shawn Burns remaining for another term. Committee members include: Shawn Burns (2014), shawnb@stanford.edu; George Rudebusch (2012), george.rudebusch@nau.edu; Jennifer Vest (2012), earthlink.net; Jacob M. Held (2013), jmhheld@uca.edu; Debby D. Hutchins (2013), hutchins@gonzaga.edu; Lorraine Mayer (*ex officio*, *Newsletter on Indigenous Philosophy*), mayerl@brandonu.ca; and C-Kyle Whyte (*ex officio*, Program chair), kwhyte@msu.edu.

In 2009, the Committee on Indigenous Philosophers hosted two sessions at the Central Division meeting in Chicago. In keeping with Indigenous traditions presenters chose to give either oral talks or formal papers. Following Oral Tradition, Audra Simpson gave a powerful and enlightening presentation on the politics of Liberalism, the impact and effect of Residential Schools, and more recently the formal apologies that have since been offered to Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Similarly Lee Hester discussed the importance of Thomas Norton's publication *The Dance of Person and Place: One Interpretation of American Indian*.

Lorraine Mayer

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Call for Papers

Ayaangwaamizin: International Journal of Indigenous Philosophy is seeking submissions for a special edition on the philosophy of Vine Deloria, Jr. Articles should focus on the works, life, projects of Vine Deloria, Jr. as they contribute to a deeper understanding of philosophical issues and themes. Of particular interest are articles that convey the importance of Deloria's philosophical work to Indigenous communities. Example questions might be: How does Deloria's work contribute to understanding the nature of justice or even a deeper understanding of the problem of Indigenous justice

in particular? How does Deloria's work contribute to a greater understanding of the nature of knowledge and importance of Indigenous knowledge in particular? How does Deloria's work contribute to a greater understanding of the nature and importance of Indigenous worldviews?

Call for Papers

A call is out to all scholars who participated in the March 30-April 2 Central Division Meeting in Minneapolis symposiums on Environmental Justice and Indigenous Peoples and the Vine Deloria, Jr. session. If you want to have your presentation considered for publication in our next two APA issues please submit a full paper to MayerL@brandonu.ca by the end of December 2011.

Vine Deloria, Jr. Memorial Awards

Deloria APA Conference Travel Grants. Native graduate philosophy students are invited to apply for \$500 grants to fund travel to American Philosophical Association conferences. One travel grant is reserved for each of the conferences with the following deadlines for the receipt of requests: December 1, 2011 for the Eastern Division meetings; March 1, 2012 for the Central Division meetings; April 1, 2012 for the Pacific Division meetings.

Applicants for the travel grant are asked to submit *electronically* a multi-paragraph statement (1) introducing the applicant and affirming tribal enrollment or affiliation, and (2) detailing the applicant's purpose in attending the conference. Since special consideration will be given to applicants who are presenting, it is especially important to detail and evidence any and all contributions that applicants will make to the conference.

Deloria Philosophy Essay Prizes. Indigenous undergraduate students are invited to submit a philosophy essay for one of five \$100 prizes. Submissions should be *electronic* and received by April 1, 2012.

An essay can be about any *philosophical* problem or figure, topic or methodology, tradition or movement, but contributions to or reflections on Native or Indigenous philosophies will be especially welcome. Submissions should be well-composed and conform to a standard style manual, e.g., the *MLA Style Manual*. Essays should be between six and ten pages in length, standard margins and 12 pt. font.

Panel Schedule for APA Meeting 2009:

Panel I: Author Meets Readers

Topic: "The Dance of Person and Place: One Interpretation of American Indian Philosophy" by Thomas Norton-Smith

Chair: Kyle Whyte (Allegheny College; kylewhyte@gmail.com)

Panelists:

Thomas Norton-Smith (Author, Kent State University; tnortons@kent.edu)

Agnes Curry (St. Joseph College; acurry@sjc.edu)
Lee Hester (University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma; fachester1@usao.edu)
Scott Pratt (University of Oregon; spratt@uoregon.edu)
Sandra Tomsons (University of Winnipeg; s.tomsons@uwinnipeg.ca)

Panel II Topic: On Indigenous Apologies

Chair: Kyle Whyte (Allegheny College; kylewhyte@gmail.com)
Presenter, Audra Simpson, “Liberalism, Residential Schools, and Formal Apologies” (Columbia; as3575@columbia.edu)
Presenter, Dale Turner, “Indigenous Apologies and Reconciliation” (Dartmouth, Dale.A.Turner@Dartmouth.edu)

ARTICLES

Plural Worlds and Border Agents: Comments on The Dance of Person and Place

Scott L. Pratt

University of Oregon

Thomas has brought us full circle: from May to May, from his backyard to his backyard.

But the circle is not a simple one that ends where it begins. Instead it marks a kind of journey out and away from a place and a return to find things changed. After an eventful year of work and ceremony, Thomas finds himself again looking across his backyard.

The birdfeeder is still not moving and in this sense it marks a return to the beginning of the story. But it needs repair. The cardinals are long gone. The relations in which it stood the year before have changed and so it is both the same and in noticeable ways different from its remembered past. The tension between stability and change begins and ends the story and, I think, frames its contributions to a wider philosophical understanding of both American Indian and Western philosophy.

Before I begin my commentary, however, I would like to thank Thomas for his work and insight. It has been a privilege to read his book and to think through his arguments. In this process, I have realized again both the power of American Indian thought and its ability to transform philosophical inquiry. Years ago when I first encountered the philosophies of John Dewey and William James, it seemed clear that their work emerged from a world that was not simply a product of European invaders adapting without aid to a new place. As a descendent of those invaders, I wanted to better understand my place and the conflict between the monism of American colonialism and the pluralism that struggles against it even today. I argued then that European American thought owed a debt to the thought of the people they encountered here and, at the intersection of European and American thought, there must be much more to learn about how to live and flourish in this land. Thomas' work marks another instance of that influence and connection.

In my comments today, I will focus primarily on the intersection between Western and American Indian philosophy. At the center of *The Dance of Person and Place* there is an argument that sets out to use resources from Western philosophy—the constructivist philosophy of Nelson Goodman—to demonstrate on its own terms the legitimacy of American Indian worlds. “My purpose,” he says, “is not to critique the

Western tradition, but to argue that—contrary to centuries of condescension and derision—an American Indian world version makes a legitimate world, *even within a culturally sophisticated Western constructivist framework*” (7). The result, as Thomas observes, “is that Western and American Indian world versions make equally *legitimate, actual worlds*” (227). This conclusion intersects with a particular interpretation of American Indian philosophy offered by Thomas that provides an account of the world that stands side by side with the Western one. I will argue that Thomas' conclusion about the equality of worlds is not entirely correct and that using Goodman's constructivism and the interpretation of an American Indian world Thomas offers, one can conclude that the Western world is rather a narrowed world version perhaps of superior destructiveness but of limited potential to foster growth and change. Put another way, even the constructivist theory of Goodman cannot contain the Native American world version proposed, though the American Indian world that emerges can contain the Western world as characterized in Goodman's theory.

Thomas begins by making an important point about his subject matter: “Just as in the case of Western Philosophy, there is no monolithic set of beliefs that constitute the American Indian philosophy” (9). This claim is consistent with the generous pluralism and the inclusive practice that Thomas later holds as part of the practice of inquiry in his interpretation of American Indian Philosophy. This disposition appears to be at odds with a claim just two pages later. “In Western thought,” he says, “we draw easy distinctions between various branches of knowledge—religions and sciences, technologies and humanities among them.” He continues, “There are no such easy distinctions between various realms of knowledge in American Indian traditions” (10-12).

There is an immediate tension between the rejection of monolithic conceptions of Western and Native philosophies and the universal claims made about them. My concern—surprisingly—is not that these two claims are at odds. I suspect that such generalizations are central to the process of comparison and critique and key to the possibilities of growth and change. It is rather the tension between the claims that traditions are at once not monolithic and can be correctly described using universal claims that marks the inequality of worlds and, incidentally, makes way for the further moral considerations that Thomas suggests in his conclusion.

In order to realize his first purpose, Thomas sets out the constructivist philosophy of Goodman who argued in part that worlds are made not given and are many rather than one. To show this, Goodman argues that whatever world is experienced, that world gains meaning as a world through what is said about it. William James captures the issue in his lecture, “What Pragmatism Means.” He imagines two people standing together and watching a friend who is trying to see a squirrel hiding on the other side of a tree. Each time the friend moves to see the squirrel, the squirrel moves in the opposite direction staying just out of sight. When asked to explain what they see, they give two different versions of the scene. To one, their friend is circling the squirrel; to the other, the friend is not circling the squirrel but is circling tree. In important ways, both versions are right, even as they make incompatible claims.

For Goodman, such ordinary disagreements in description suggest larger differences. In light of statements like these, Goodman asks, “Shall we say, then, that they describe different worlds, and indeed that there are as many different worlds as there are such mutually exclusive truths?” (2). Such truths, Goodman argues, are usually taken as abbreviations for more complex systems or frames of reference in terms of which an observer makes sense of the scene. In light of a given frame

of reference—involving the expectations of an observer—it is true that the friend goes around the squirrel. These frames of reference, when sufficiently comprehensive and complex, can be said to form one world of many, each distinct in its truths.

One might argue that such versions are at best descriptions of a present real world in terms of which the versions are developed. After all, the friends watching the squirrel are watching something in common, even if they describe it differently. Goodman argues in reply that “We can have words without a world but no world without words or other symbols” (6). What appears to be a common experience only takes on its commonality in the context of the descriptions we offer of it. The contrary descriptions of the world cannot lead to a common experience because whatever experience is claimed as common must be *claimed*, not simply grasped. “So long as contrasting right versions not all reducible to one are countenanced, unity is to be sought not in an ambivalent or neutral *something* beneath these versions but in an overall organization embracing them” (5).

What is common is not some independent reality in terms of which versions are right or wrong, but rather in whatever principles or processes make for versions in the first place. It is here that Thomas’ claim about American Indian world versions takes hold. Despite centuries of disregard, Indian worlds, to the extent that they are right world versions, are no less worthy of attention and respect than the world versions developed by Europeans. There is, for Goodman and for Thomas, a difference between true and false world versions. As Thomas observes, “true versions create well-made worlds while false or empty versions create ill-made or unmade worlds” (58). What makes a world version true cannot be its relation to an independent world (since there can be no access to such worlds). Instead, Goodman proposes that worlds are neither the consequence of independently real things nor creations out of nothing at all, but rather “*from other worlds*. Worldmaking as we know it,” he says, “always starts from worlds already on hand: the making is remaking” (6). If this is so, then truth can be understood in terms of its relation to the worlds already in play. A version, Goodman says, “is taken to be true when it offends no unyielding beliefs and none of its own precepts. Among beliefs unyielding at a given time may be long-lived reflections of recent observations, and other convictions and prejudices ingrained with varying degrees of firmness” (17). Truth, from this angle, is a kind of acceptability in terms of beliefs and precepts already given, what Goodman calls *ultimate acceptability*.

In order to understand how worlds can be constructed from the world versions at hand, it is important to understand that world versions are a kind of knowledge—a knowhow—that provides its knowers with the resources to make and maintain their worlds.

The knowledge at issue (and arguably any knowledge at all) is a matter of activity and not simply a distinctive set of propositions, namely, those that are true, justified, and believed. In the standard formulation of twentieth-century analytic philosophy, *s* knows that *p* if and only if *p* is true and *p* is verified for *S* and *p* is believed by *S*, where “*p*” stands for a proposition and “*S*” for a subject or knower.

Instead of the standard formulation, Thomas argues that an American Indian conception of knowledge can be analyzed in terms of know-how:

For subject(s) *S*, her, his, or their purpose or goal *g*, and action or performance, *p*, *S* knows how to *p* to achieve *g* if and only if (1) *p* is true for *S* for *g*, and (2) *p* is justified or verified for *S* for *g*.

Under this analysis, propositions are replaced with

performances or actions that are at once relative to a goal or purpose and at the same time verified or justified for the knowers. But what does it mean to be verified?

From a Native perspective, verification is a process that relies on two different sorts of confirmation. If one holds that some performance is good for curing illness or telling a good story (a story for some purpose) then these claims of knowledge can be verified by experience, that is, by trying the performance or action and seeing if it leads to the result sought. Alternatively, rather than trying the performance, one might consult others, elders and others who have tried the performance before. Thomas captures these two modes of verification in the schema:

For subject(s), *S*, her, his, or their purpose or goal, *g*, and action or performance *p*, *p* is justified or verified for *S* for *g* if and only if either (1) *S* directly experiences the success of *p* in achieving *g*, or (2) the success of *p* in achieving *g* is endorsed by *S*’s tribal tradition.

In simplest terms, if some performance or action is proposed as a way of achieving some purpose, *S* can try the activity and if it leads to the desired end, it is verified. If *S* hasn’t tried or been able to try the activity, she is able to verify her action as a means of achieving a purpose without trying it by consulting her tribal tradition. Placed in relation to the analysis of knowledge, it appears that *S* knows how to act to achieve a purpose if the action or performance is verified (in one or both of the two ways given) and it is true for *S*, the knower, for *g*, the purpose to be achieved. But what is it for an activity to be true for *S*? It appears that this is a simple moment of radical relativism where it is enough to affirm that some claim or activity is “true for me.” This conclusion overlooks the character of truth as Thomas (and Goodman) present it. Truth on this model is a matter of ultimate acceptability and such acceptability is not an individual matter but a relation to the beliefs and precepts of the frame of reference at work. To say an activity or claim is true for me is in fact to make a claim on behalf of the frame of reference—the beliefs and organizing principles I have inherited—and so to say that *p* is true for *S* for *g*, is to assert that *p* is a way for the person, *S*, to realize the purpose *g*.

Within the American Indian world version Thomas proposes, the frame of reference in terms of which a performance is true is characterized by an attitude of respect on the part of the subject or knower.¹ On this account, an American Indian world version is legitimate if it consists of actions or performances that are true and justified by individual experience or by the tradition. To the extent that Western world versions also consist of actions or performances that are true and justified in this way, then they are also legitimate. It seems, then, that Thomas has succeeded in his first purpose.

The approach to worldmaking adapted from Goodman intersects with Thomas’ interpretation of a Native American world version in his discussion of how experience figures in the process of verification. He proposes two components of the Native perspective that “inform direct experience.” The first of these is “the absence of *s* skepticism about the veracity of any and all experience” (120). In light of this expectation, the experiences that figure in the process of verification can be accepted at “face value.” “[T]here are no inherently unreliable or deceptive experiences,” Thomas says, “in the American Indian world version” (122). I will call this the principle of inclusion.

The second component, “*relatedness is a world ordering principle*” (120), affects the character of “direct experience.” “Of course,” Thomas says, “direct experience, so informed, constructs relationships between tangible physical beings; but it also perceives relationships between the physical and the

realm Fixico terms the ‘metaphysical’” (123).

In this way, individual experiences, including dreams and visions, can be understood to have implications for “tangible” things—the lives of one’s family, the land of one’s people and so on. In this sense, verification in experience has wide force and connections.

The principle of relatedness has a further implication as well implicit in the schema of verification. Recall that a performance is verified if it is either experienced by a subject or endorsed by the subject’s tribal tradition. This connection between performances and one’s connection to a tribal tradition is key. In order for the schema of verification to work (and for ultimate acceptability as well) it is the case that subjects are part of a tribal tradition (as the source of knowledge beyond what one can experience and as the source of the frame of reference which grounds ultimate acceptability). To be a member of a tribe—to participate in its world version—is a matter of performing the ceremonies endorsed by the tribe as part of being a member of that tribe. In effect, the principle of relatedness does not describe a stipulated relationship but rather a performative relationship. Taken together, the two components of verification, inclusion and relatedness, set up a problem.

Suppose that someone proposes that some performance is good for some purpose, perhaps a shared one. The person tries the performance and experiences its success. But now suppose that person’s tribal tradition holds that some other activity q is good for that same purpose and that by taking the action she does, the person rules out the possibility of taking q . Insofar as, in taking the action p , she cannot take q , p as an action is equivalent to $\neg q$. If this situation arises, then it follows that the person both knows something that is not endorsed by her tribal tradition, and this knowledge actually contradicts the tribal tradition. On the principle of inclusion, despite the contradictory character of the performance, the experience is to be trusted and the performance verified.

The tension between inclusion and the requirements of relatedness in the context of world versions leads to a paradox. First, if the performance that is ruled out is one of the performances required to be a part of the tribal tradition, then the person who has verified the new performance as part of the tradition is, in fact, not in the tradition once the verification has occurred. The subject, by engaging in activities that are at odds with those endorsed by her tribal tradition, may be at once a member of the community and at the same time an outsider who fails to perform the ceremonies. One might argue from the perspective of Goodman’s theory that the performance may be verified but may not be ultimately acceptable. It may be possible, for example, to accomplish the goal of raising corn to feed the community by the use of inexpensive fertilizers and without planting the Three Sisters. Such fertilizers may rule out the traditional planting even as it provides sufficient food to sustain the community. This new activity, however, is not ultimately acceptable because it is disrespectful of both the agricultural tradition and the persons involved in that tradition. Since this new performance is not ultimately acceptable then, despite the verification in the experience of a single subject, the performance is not true. Fair enough. But ruling out individual experience when it is at odds with the tradition overrides the principle of inclusiveness that is part of the proposed American Indian world version. If, on the other hand, inclusiveness is preserved, then the performances endorsed by the tribal tradition can be set aside in some cases and individuals whose experiences dissent from the tradition are, again, both inside and outside the tradition.

The problem, I would suggest, is not that there is something wrong with the principles of inclusiveness and relatedness or

that the American Indian world version that Thomas proposes fails. The problem, I think, is that the resources of Goodman’s constructivism are insufficient to account for Native worlds of the sort characterized by Thomas. This is easy to see if one begins with the presumption that American Indian worlds are legitimate according some conception of worlds. Next, entertain the idea that Goodman’s constructivism is just such a conception. What we find is that this theory of worlds can account for Western world versions (as Goodman himself verifies) but it cannot consistently account for an American Indian world version when the organizing principles of inclusion and relatedness are part of the version. However, if we imagine a conception of worlds of the sort implied by Thomas’s book as a whole, we have a conception of worlds that includes the restrictions of Goodman’s theory and the principles of inclusion and relatedness. From this perspective, we find that both Western and American Indian worlds can be explained, but the Western world relatively narrow world that lack certain principles that could make them more expansive.

But what of the paradox? The paradoxes only emerge if the tensions between individuals and traditions are taken as problematic in a given world version. As I said at the beginning, tensions and even contradictions mark the character of experience in which one tries to compare and contrast. Implicit in the claim that the American Indian organizing principles lead to paradox is the expectation that the state of being both in and out of a tribal tradition is a problem to be addressed (as it would be if we held that worlds are adequately characterized through the notion of knowledge as schematized by Thomas on behalf of Goodman).

On the contrary, there are at least two reasons to view the paradox I have described as unproblematic. First, the experience of people who are at the boundaries of traditions are too numerous to deny. Any theory that fails to have a place for them is itself problematic. The theory of worlds coupled with the principles of inclusion and relatedness naturally generates such agents and they may be a feature of an expansive world rather than a problem to be solved. Second, the paradox I proposed within the notion of knowledge presumes that the system of relations is a static one; that the standards for ultimate acceptability are never open to revision, that tribal traditions are fixed. Of course, Thomas denies that such traditions (even Western traditions) are forever closed and unchanging. In the end, I agree with Thomas that Western world versions and American Indian world versions are legitimate and actual (and in this narrow sense equal as well). But they are not equal in the sense that Western worlds, at least as characterized here, are diminished worlds that lack the potential to recognize the experience and people at the boundaries.

This brings us back again full circle. In the introduction to *The Dance of Person and Place*, Thomas identifies his own history as grounded in both traditions of the West and of the Shawnee. He concludes the book by observing that the conclusions of his book will have managed to make “everybody angry.” The book itself and his conclusion, however, demand a stronger conclusion that the different world versions are legitimate and actual. The stronger conclusion, I would argue, is the larger point that while Western and Indian world version are worlds, they are not equal and all those offended by this claim would be better off learning why.

Endnote

1. This is captured in the schema: “For subject(s), S , her, his, or their purpose or goal g , and action or performance p , p is true for S for g if and only if p is respectfully successful in achieving g ” (110).

Epistemology: Constructing or Deconstructing Worlds?

Sandra Tomsons

University of Winnipeg

When Thomas Norton-Smith sent me *The Dance of Person and Place* in manuscript form after I was honored with an invitation to be part of his reader panel at the 2010 Committee on the Status of Indigenous Philosophy conference, I received *The Burden* (the book's working title) with excitement, interest, and anticipation. A non-Indigenous political philosopher, whose research area is now primarily Aboriginal rights and Indigenous philosophy, my work has focused on Indigenous metaphysics and moral and political axiology. However, recently, I have learned Indigenous epistemological axiology is very relevant to my research. While showing me problems inherent in liberal theory's old and new accounts of Aboriginal rights and giving me criteria for assessing future accounts, Dale Turner's *This is not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy* argues I must become knowledgeable about Indigenous epistemology. According to Turner, Indigenous Elders are experts in Indigenous philosophy—the means to understanding Aboriginal rights. Elders' epistemic status in Indigenous epistemology and Western skepticism regarding epistemic status not grounded in scientific methodologies makes Turner's epistemic need for Indigenous Elders contentious. He is right, philosophy-trained Word Warriors will need to explain and defend Elders' epistemic standing in legal and political discourse about Aboriginal rights. Hence, non-Indigenous philosophers working in this area also are obliged to reflect on Elder epistemic status.

Norton-Smith's *The Dance of Person and Place* (hereafter *The Burden*) shows why non-Aboriginal philosophers will find thinking about Indigenous epistemology philosophically informative for many reasons. By thinking from a Native standpoint about Western philosophy's epistemology, in particular Nelson Goodman's constructionist theory, Norton-Smith opens new doors to understanding and opportunities for insight into Western epistemology's strengths and weaknesses.¹ Furthermore, understanding Indigenous epistemology may make them less likely to slide into unquestioning acceptance of the Western paradigm's knowledge-ordering principles and accompanying epistemic hierarchy and attitudes.

I see an epistemic paradox in contemporary Western philosophy's dominant epistemology. Its principle-based dogmatic rejection of the possibility of non-scientific knowledge starkly contradicts philosophy's principle-based epistemic requirement to question assumptions. The latter implies openness to error dogmatic conceit makes impossible and it implies epistemic humility not dogmatism's conceit. It puzzles me how Western philosophers manage to avoid extreme epistemic cognitive dissonance. From being with Indigenous persons and in my struggles with *The Burden* I learned Indigenous epistemology prohibits creating an epistemological hierarchy. This contrast with the Western paradigm's single-source account of knowledge (which grounds its epistemic hierarchy) means Norton-Smith can be a valuable ally in refuting political scientist Frances Widdowson's vitriolic analysis and critique of Traditional knowledge.² Widdowson's epistemology, essentially logical positivist, is inherently problematic from the standpoint of Western philosophy and called racist by Canadian non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal social scientists.³ However, her work demonstrates the science-only account of knowledge generally presumed by scholarly and political practice in Western society. Also, her stipulated account of

knowledge is the implicit starting point for many professional philosophers. This account implies an epistemic hierarchy with no room for Indigenous Elders' knowledge claims, and ridicule for the suggestion visions, dreams, and the oral tradition have epistemic status. Widdowson's epistemic hierarchy strips epistemic value from knowledge sources having high epistemic value in the Native paradigm. So, vital knowledge claims have no epistemic value.⁴ She thinks an objective, impartial judge (i.e., a natural or social scientist) can know the purported sources of knowledge in the Native paradigm cannot deliver knowledge since knowledge must be scientific. Hence, Indigenous Elders and their knowledge claims are analogous to the chained prisoners and their knowledge claims about shadows in Socrates' Allegory of the Cave.

For someone thinking about Indigenous epistemology in the context of thinking about Aboriginal rights, constructivist epistemologies have some appeal because of their equalizing tendencies. If access to the world is impossible and the only world to be talked about is one's culture's artificial construct, if there is no "bare fact" or "pure given," can world constructs and world-ordering axiological principles be compared other than by listing similarities and differences? Can there be a basis for judging one world-construct and its set of axiological principle better than another? For epistemological constructivists must all world constructs and epistemological principles have the same epistemic status? Does this theory imply metaphysical and epistemological relativism? *The Burden* is not silent about these matters. Goodman's response is instructive. His theory was created in the birth-place of contemporary pragmatism. Now conveniently (pragmatically) he employs epistemological pragmatism to rescue constructivism from significant epistemological questions it generates. World-constructs and world-ordering axiologies are not *pragmatically* equal. This seems true. However, remembering Widdowson's epistemology and imagining pragmatically it receives a very good grade given the success of the scientific method leaves me worried about constructivist epistemology. Let's assume her epistemology fails the pragmatic test; it is proven less useful, for example, than constructivist epistemology; I still have concerns about the constructivist's appeal to a pragmatic solution. Perhaps only because I am an unrelenting non-Aboriginal philosopher, I expect a good epistemological theory will judge her claims about knowledge, epistemological principles, and Indigenous sources of knowledge mistaken and false. Widdowson misunderstands and misrepresents knowledge in general and Indigenous knowledge in particular.

The true/false dichotomy is one I have been informed is problematic from an Indigenous perspective. So, by developing Indigenous epistemology on Goodman's constructivism, Norton-Smith selected an epistemology seemingly sharing Native epistemology's epistemic humility and openness to respecting non-Western philosophies. According to constructivist theory, if the notions of true and false have the meaning I am using, it is only within world-constructs. When applied to conflicting claims in different world constructs, true and false are interpreted only pragmatically. The assertion "This is my truth and you have your truth" spoken truthfully has a lot to recommend it morally and epistemologically in a world containing too much disrespect and intolerance. However, it might be decidedly unhelpful if it is the conclusion of a discussion of Aboriginal rights and uttered by an Indigenous person (National Chief, Assembly of First Nations) to a non-Indigenous person (Canada's Prime Minister) who, smiling, says, "Yes."

The truth/falsity dichotomy connects with another worry about Goodman's constructivist epistemology that might transfer to Norton-Smith's constructivist Native epistemology.

They both claim there is no such thing as “bare fact.” With Kant, they deny we encounter a “pure given” independent of a mind categorizing and organizing sense experience. As Norton-Smith explains, language and other culturally instilled principles impose ontological categories on experience. Patterns are not discovered in experience. They are created. He illustrates cultural creation of patterns using American Indians’ philosophy of employing circles and cycles, that is circularity, as ‘the primary temporal and special ordering principle.’ His example clarifies the notion of pattern. I wonder though if Indigenous people did not discover their principles by reflecting on experience *before* they employed them as ordering principles. For Indigenous people, are the principles not still open to refutation in experience? Blackfoot Elder explained to me that the notion of flux and change in the Indigenous paradigm means that a Native person must always be open to the possibility that what is now will change tomorrow. Perhaps this applies only to the sun rising, that is to metaphysical world-ordering principles, not to Indigenous epistemological principles.⁵

I confess I come to *The Burden* with “an axe to grind” regarding contemporary epistemology’s epistemic attitude about our knowing-relationship with the world. Unlike Norton-Smith, I am unsympathetic and impatient with constructivism’s removal of the knower from a world to be known. I worry Goodman, like Western epistemologists generally, so distances philosophical activity from reality that his theory is basically about words. Regardless of culture, we are all interested in knowing the world. Yet, in Goodman’s theory, the world has become so separated from our words that words and the principles representing the patterns we grasped in experience are now barriers separating us from the world. I can experience the word-world my culture created; but the world itself is inaccessible. Philosophy, which should be reflection on experience, is reduced to reflection on claims about claims. Goodman and other Western philosophers deny me the possibility of a reality-check and make un-intelligible the request for one.

Since I constantly rely on reality checks, being denied them makes me suspicious. Descartes’ epistemological methodology confined me briefly to the world of my mind and enabled me to better understand its activities. This was informative and interesting for a while. However, he was sensible to return my body to my mind and permit me knowledge claims about bodies. He discovered his indubitability principle was an inadequate criterion for knowledge. A second criterion was needed to explain experiential and scientific knowledge. Constructivist epistemologists might have to complement their constructivism to make room for the bare facts that connect us all to the same world. Perhaps this compromise also means epistemology becomes less a debate about language and “logic chopping” and more about comparing our epistemological principles and knowledge claims about the world with the world.

Norton-Smith challenges one believing in a mind-independent reality to tell him about it. This challenge merits extensive reflection that time and space do not permit here. From Western philosophy’s dominant epistemology, the challenge effectively prevents claiming there is a mind-independent reality. Since one responding realizes s/he is a mind doing the telling, any telling would be mind-dependent. I admit being backed into a corner by the logic of this argument. However, the discussion of the Aboriginal rights of Canada’s Indigenous peoples is too important for me to remain sitting there. Admitting the logical conundrum, I leave it for Western logic experts to resolve since it seems unreasonable to allow it to interfere with efforts to eliminate real oppression.

I don’t know whether a mind-independent description is possible of the empirical reality of the oppression experienced by Canada’s Indigenous people and peoples. It is possible to provide a list of claims about the lives of Indigenous peoples on Reserves. They are claims about the people, place, and circumstances that can be uttered and are true in the Native and Western paradigms. These claims are bare facts about the “pure given” constructivist accounts deny exist. No matter the language or the culturally instilled world-ordering principles of those in the group experiencing life on the Reserve, everyone can make some identical claims about the reality they experience. This is not to deny the significant ways Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons differ in their analysis of the shared claims and explanations about the causes of what the claims report. I am not claiming identical perceptual experiences or understanding on the part of individuals or between philosophical paradigms. I make two relatively modest assertions: (1) There is a Reserve. (2) We can all make some true (in the correspond-to-reality fact-about-the-world sense) claims about it.

Our bare facts about the Reserve are not the most important things to be said about it. Important assertions, for example, “A non-Aboriginal dictator rules the Reserve,” or “Indigenous peoples are oppressed by non-Aboriginal governments,” are based upon what Norton-Smith calls culturally instilled world-ordering principles. Understanding these principles and their role in constructing our understanding of the world is important and I want Norton-Smith’s help in thinking about it. Humans in some sense experience trees, flies, stones, and rivers simply by being what they are, being “turned on” and being in the world. Our world-ordering principles “attach to them” their meaning and value. So, for example, as mind-bodies in the world we experience justice or injustice the way our culture makes seeing justice and injustice possible. We *know* cultures see these parts of reality differently and Norton-Smith’s world-constructivist account helps explain why we see differently though not that we know we do. For seeing justice, language and world-ordering principles are analogous to eyes and other senses with which we see each other, dogs, ants, butterflies, trees, flowers, stones, rivers, waves, and the wind.⁶

This morning, walking on a sandy road in Latvia thinking about *The Burden*, I watched a centipede who was crossing the road. I told the centipede that although we are on the same road and moving along it, our road-experiences are not very similar.⁷ Then I thought about shared experiences with Indigenous friends. Despite many differences, Janice and I share similar world-encounters when we are together. Unlike the centipede and me, being human and language users, we can discuss similarities and differences. Together, we can deconstruct our separate interpretations of experience and clarify the extent of our shared understanding and what our different cultures’ world-ordering principles impose on the experience. In cross-cultural philosophical dialogue, we can discover the two sets of axiological constructs. In so doing, are we creating a culture-free zone for philosophical inquiry? Now, can we do metaphysics, epistemology, and moral and political axiology in this culture-free zone assessing together world-constructs and “world-ordering principles”?

I think from the perspective of Goodman’s constructivist epistemology, the answer to all these questions is the same: No. One is held captive by and in one’s world-construct since, in some sense, it is all one has. Philosophy has no power to liberate one from epistemological prison, only the power to reveal it. I am not sure Norton-Smith’s Indigenous constructivist epistemology is so similar to Goodman’s that he finds himself in an analogous prison. However, I know cross-cultural philosophical dialogues

with Lorraine Mayer and other Indigenous scholars provided world-construct freeing experiences. Seeing epistemological prison(s) in the Western paradigm is not yet to secure release from one's prison. But, seeing is the insight making it possible to form the idea of escape.

If Goodman and Norton-Smith are right that language and other culturally instilled world-ordering principles impose ontological (and presumably axiological) categories on experience, then the primary task of the epistemologist might well be deconstructionist. Perhaps professional philosophers doing epistemology are tasked with taking apart a language's epistemological components and disentangling and making explicit culturally instilled knowledge-ordering principles. For philosophers in the Western tradition shedding the self-image of discovering and relieving humanity of our world-knowledge illusions and dressing in John Locke's janitorial service metaphor might require more humility than we can muster. However, those of us who try Locke's cleaning-up the paradigm approach may find it less frustrating than being in logical-corners and there is the promise of a less mistaken-world-ordering-principled look at the world than before we started sweeping.

When Lorraine Mayer and I began engaging in what Mayer calls "trans-cultural philosophical dialogue" we were not seeking escape from our world-constructs or their world-ordering metaphysical and axiological principles. Our aims were less esoteric, namely, to understand Aboriginal rights and a just and harmonious relationship between Canada's Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal governments. For me, proof we escaped the incommensurability of our different philosophies (or proved they are not incommensurable) is contained in our jointly written introductions and philosophical dialogues in the anthology we have co-authored.⁸ Without being dismissive of our vastly different life experiences or significant differences between Cree and Western Philosophy, I believe we arrived at fundamental points of agreement from our different perceptual realities. These points of agreement included bare facts as well as normative judgments. I see nothing in principle preventing me from looking forward to discovering, in future trans-cultural epistemological dialogues, points of agreement about these epistemological questions.

I want to close with a public apology to Thomas. In rereading comments I prepared for the session on his book, I was shocked to discover a disrespectful claim very dismissive of his great book: "I do not pretend to understand American Indian epistemology. You say some tantalizing things here, but, I would be building a tree out of a couple of sticks if I tried to construct an American Indian epistemology out of what you say in the book." My apologies, Thomas. I should have said: "Not being an expert in Goodman and having non-Aboriginal pre-kindergarten level understanding of Indigenous philosophy, I need guidance when reading *The Burden* or I will misconstrue its account of Indigenous epistemology. I need to study *The Burden* only in the company of its author or an Indigenous philosopher, not the solitude of my study. Many thanks for *The Burden*. Since I will spend as much time as possible in the company of Indigenous scholars, I will be learning from it for a very long time."

Endnotes

1. Norton-Smith demonstrates a rich understanding of Goodman's theory. His exegesis of Goodman's central tenets is lucid, exact, and accessible. Unlike this reader, he is Goodman's equal in the area of propositional logic.
2. Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008).

3. For example, sociologist J.S. Frideres, Panel Presentation on Disrobing at Mount Royal College, December 1, 2008; anthropologist Peter Kulchyski, "The Emperor's Old Clothes," *Canadian Dimension Magazine*, March/April 2009; and political scientist Taiiaki Alfred, "Redressing Racist Academics, Or, Put Your Clothes Back On, Please! A Review of Widdowson and Howard's *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, January 16, 2009; cultural anthropologist, Kathy Buddle "Treacherous political path: Look at 'aboriginal industry' an inept rant," Review, *Winnipeg Free Press*, January 25, 2009.
4. Her discussion of these claims seems to accord them epistemic disvalue.
5. Leroy Little Bear, Chapter 2, *Philosophy and Aboriginal Rights: Critical Dialogues*, ed., Lorraine Mayer and Sandra Tomsons (Toronto: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, 2012).
6. The most important metaphysical and axiological claims one makes about these realities also rely on language and culturally instilled world-ordering principles. So, for example, Western languages translate but do not "live" the Indigenous words for "all my relations" and in the Western paradigm "rocks are animate" is nonsense or poetry.
7. Unlike Microsoft Word, which wants to help me correct my grammatical mistake, I use the term "who" to refer to the centipede.
8. *Philosophy and Aboriginal Rights: Critical Dialogues*.

A Challenging Conception of Persons

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...all the genuine, deep delight of life is in showing people the mud-pies you have made; and life is at its best when we confidently recommend our mud-pies to each other's sympathetic consideration.

– J.M. Thorburn, *Art and the Unconscious*, 1925, (quoted in Susan K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 1957.)

"And, I remind, it is a philosophy conference, so the crushing, yet deserved critique is in order."

– personal communication from Thomas

"Actual, well-made persons"

– an American Indian world version constructs an actual, well-made world.

I'd like to congratulate Thomas and thank him for offering this work. If one agrees with the project of articulating Indigenous philosophies in an academic context, then Thomas's contribution is, to reiterate one of his anonymous readers, "of great significance." It offers in clear terms a highly systematic approach to the "central and most significant questions of Indigenous philosophy presently: What is the nature and worth of Indigenous philosophy, both traditionally and as a present and future academic enterprise" (Readers Report 3).

I should note from the outset that I agree with the project, fraught with peril as it is. Thomas mentions some of these perils both in his introduction in his closing chapter. Foucault famously claims that "everything is dangerous," and this claim is, I think, accurate and in congruence with what Thomas and Brian Burkhart, following Vine Deloria, articulate as the central concern of an American Indian philosophical inquiry—finding and walking on the right road. Things can change. Signs can be either subtle or unclear. Paths are trampled or bulldozed,

effaced through both accident and malicious purpose. There are snares, and both ample opportunity and need for self-questioning of motives. It's possible that something offered in one spirit is taken up in unintended and horrifying ways; in an academic-institutional context where it is all too easy to slide from affirming the importance of searching for truth to self-appointed gate-keeping, and a cultural context structured by layers of colonialist appropriation, such offerings are really dangerous. But I think to proceed without offering them is self-defeating, like standing still and refusing to walk. For their givers, they need to be offered, and as with tender plants, the ones who care about them need to find ways to both shelter and strengthen them.

I should explain, for those of you who don't know me, who I am and why I care, because I think it's probably the case, and probably should be the case, that my motives are questioned. With Anne Waters, I am one of the co-editors of a series we've entitled "Living Indigenous Philosophies" that is part of the philosophy list for SUNY Press. This series is conceived to support the project of gaining a toehold of legitimacy for Indigenous philosophies within the corridors of academic philosophy, to argue that they are living enterprises by living peoples, not anthropological relics, and moreso that they are "live options," with compelling conceptual strengths. We envision the series as a space for philosophies from all over the world as Indigenous intellectuals creatively, and critically, engage the philosophical tradition and profession.

I am interested in Indigenous philosophies partly because I can perceive a few common patterns between elements of Indigenous thinking and some of the ways of my ancestors and family members who settled in what is now New Mexico and Colorado. Although my late mother, Barbara Gallegos, and many of my relatives were physically indistinguishable from the tribal peoples near whom—and sometimes alongside whom—they lived, there were also vast differences and things not shared. There were ways, on both sides, of maintaining both respectful and disdainful distance, and I find the points of divergence interesting and important as well.

In working out her own path, my mother's choice to pursue a college education (it took her nine years to cobble together the resources) led to an Anglo father for me, yielding more indeterminate looks and name, significant privilege with respect to mainstream education, and the dispositions sufficient to garner me a Ph.D. in philosophy.

But most urgently, I am mother to an Indian child, an enrolled member of the Peoria Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma (whose ways as a much more outwardly assimilated group are actually more foreign to me than the putative Others of my mother's world). As great-grandson of a chief important for regaining recognition after termination, and as nephew to the current chief, my son faces definite expectations, which raise important responsibilities, questions, and challenges for me.

Anne Waters notes that the struggle, faced by American Indian philosophers with western academic training, to navigate (at least) two very different cultures, can lead to excellence, a virtuosity built from "working in at least two philosophical traditions, always playing one against the other, as a symphony of thought" (Waters xv). I like this metaphor because it displaces the primacy of both the single voice and the written score while it recognizes their place. While Thomas has produced a significantly academic, western book, it's not simply that and certainly cannot be dismissed as that. I joked to Thomas months ago that if it manages to piss everyone off, that's probably a sign of the book's importance. But that's a lonely place to be and in a world stressing relatedness, a paradoxical one. It seems

to me that in his choice of problems and approaches, Thomas seems to be proceeding as Vine Deloria instructs: "great care must be taken to identify tribal societies and Western thinking as being different in their approach to the world but equal in their conclusions about the world" (Waters 5). The only way to do this with any ontological depth or ethical weight is to wield, carefully, the double-edged sword of constructivism. Thomas has done precisely this—found a rigorous way of setting up space for actual equal worlds while both avoiding the problem of self-refutation.

His critique of Goodman is to the point, I think, though I leave it to those schooled more thoroughly in analytic methods to speak in more detail here. Going further, he marks points of conceptual contact; the chapter on the concept of personhood is a case in point I consider in more detail below. Finally and perhaps most importantly, he makes the ethical demand for respect. Again his way of proceeding is in congruence with Deloria, who further instructs: "This demand for respect must touch all points where the two groups come into contact with each other" (6). An interesting question, then, is what sort of contact we're having here, and now.

To settle in to considering Thomas's argument, let's re-enact an exercise he recommends, which we can call the Person Exercise:

For 20 seconds, make a list of as many kinds of animals as possible.

For 20 more seconds, make a list of as many kinds of persons as possible.

Explanation: "The brief period of time for each task is supposed to elicit a reflexive rather than a considered response on the assumption that unreflective responses best reflect deeply ingrained conceptual categories."

Continuing, I quote Thomas: "Lists of kinds of persons tend to fall into three categories: human characteristics, human nationalities, and human ethnicities. ...Traditional Native list makers, however, would include "human being" on the list of animals without a second thought, and, remarkably, would include nonhuman beings on the list of persons. *Indeed, it would not be at all surprising if the list of animals were a subset of the list of persons*" (19).

Let's continue with our look at the expansive conception of personhood. Before offering an explanation—and justification—of a conception of persons as spirit beings, and human beings as merely one kind of spirit being, Thomas uses Poole to examine the presuppositions of predominant Western philosophical accounts and to show that for them, "being human is neither necessary nor sufficient for personhood" (130). For Poole, these accounts go awry and the western tradition performs a sort of slight of hand, viewing the basic criteria for personhood—moral agency and self-reflexiveness—in abstraction from the concrete human conditions which gave rise both to these abilities and the terms by which they're understood. Thomas also then cites Poole's warning that however useful it is to think about capacities as rationality or moral agency when discussing some questions, we should not think these limited notions describe the essential core of either humanity or personhood (131).

Thomas then notes that an American Indian conception of personhood actually shares elements of the Western conception as described by Poole:

1. Human beings are not persons by nature—the features which make them candidates for personhood cannot be abstracted from particular, concrete forms of existence. Attaining and maintaining the status of personhood depends on two factors:

- a. performative participation in certain forms of social practices
 - b. the presence and continuance of relationships with and obligations to other persons
2. Moral agency is at the core of personhood. The practices and relationships crucial for attaining and maintaining the status of personhood are those fostering moral obligations. [So what does ‘moral’ turn out to be? Not giving into one’s own desires at the expense of others, failing to be mindful of one’s space, one’s responsibilities to others. The notion is of gifting as the most important normative practice (151)]
 3. Being a person is not what is essential to being a human.

In contrast to Poole’s aim, which is to tie the concept of personhood back to concrete human life, if not human essence, in a restrictive move, Thomas uses this congruence to press the point that it makes sense to talk about non-human persons, and thus that the more expansive conception of personhood is equally justified. As many stories show, while only animate beings are possible persons (153), humans are only one kind of animate being. As the story of Coyote, Iktome, and the Rock illustrates, an American Indian world includes nonhuman spirit persons who are seriously misunderstood if interpreted in line with western conceptions of divinity and the supernatural. While nonhuman spirit persons are powerful, they are not loaded with the ontological and ethical baggage that comes with notions of divine omnipotence. More to the point, one of the central ordering principles of the west, the distinction between “natural” and “supernatural” realms, just doesn’t apply.

Humans, too, are spirit beings; in Algonquin languages, spirit is *manitou*, animation, life force. Thomas works to demystify this concept, proposing that its experiential content is actually “closely akin to the experiential content of the Western concept *mind* (141). If talk of minds—talk of experiencing one’s own beliefs, desires, and mental events as one’s own and as animating one’s actions, and talk of *experiencing* the actions of others as illustrating the fact that they have minds as well (I suggest that phenomenologically, there’s less of an inference there)—isn’t rejected out of hand in Western contexts, then western minds should see *manitouki* as really not so strange. And, given that many things in the world can be experienced as animate, unless we’re hopeless prejudiced, we see the concept of “spirit being” can apply to many things besides human beings. The test for how far it applies would be experience, which in principle is always open to future revision.

Besides mentality, animate beings—spirit beings—exhibit capacities for change in outward form. This is one of the features that humans and non-human persons share, though humans may not have much power here. But this isn’t what makes either sort of entity a person.

What makes an animate being a person is “membership and participation in an actual network of social and moral relationships and practices with other persons,” in a word, moral agency. Possession of attributes like rationality or self-reflection (or a soul as a property as in some western religious discourses) is insufficient. And rather than contractual and other relatively thin forms of human relating as the paradigms for interpersonal responsibility and obligation, we need to look at the richer and more complex patterns articulated in kinship and family relationships.

Insofar as such a view fosters “[t]he profound lesson is that all animate beings are essentially the same kind of entity—a *manitou* with a changeable outward form,” it supports a disposition to perceive and cultivate kinship with a vast range

of nonhuman persons. As Thomas articulates, “all sorts of nonhuman spirit beings—ancestors and animals, plants and places, physical forces and cardinal directions, the Sun, Earth, and other powerful *manitouki*—are members of the American Indian kinship group, and so are persons” (153).

It is not necessarily the case that all kinds of animate being are alive in the Western sense, and again it’s sometimes scaling back the ontological baggage loaded on from Western views that’s in order. Thomas takes pains to show that it’s not the case that an American Indian view commits one to saying that all rocks are alive. But the stories show that some special kinds of beings, like special rocks with spidery veins of green moss that tell a story, or like stories themselves, could be persons, depending on whether there are recognized relations of kinship. Kinship relations mediate differences within an overall conception of equality based on playing a necessary part in the ongoing process of making and sustaining the American Indian World (151).

So enacting and sustaining these relationships constructs a world where, on the one hand, many kinds of beings can be understood as persons. But on the other, the paradigm for relationship—what I call the kinship requirement—makes the standards for personhood very high in other respects. The end of the chapter starts to spell out some of the implications. In neither the Western account nor in Thomas’s reconstruction of an American Indian account is it the case that all human beings count as real persons. He uses a story told by Lee Hester to illustrate that enacting one’s potential for kinship, hence personhood, involves showing up, fostering, and maintaining relationships.

In both accounts, personhood turns out to be a normative category that functions to confer moral membership in the circle of concern and responsibility. In the West, disputes about the moral conferring proceed by way of disputes about ontology. The disputes are premised on a restrictive ontology (a point certainly implied by Thomas’s analyses but not directly stated). Does such and such an entity possess the requisite features to grant it entry into the privileged class of beings about which we should have concern? What sort of evidence would count? I’m thinking about sentience-based arguments for animal rights, disputes about the status of fetuses that attempt to draw lines at viability, arguments about the acceptability of some forms of genetic research, etc. The point is that concerns about ontology, and what counts as “human,” mask the fact that it’s really about ethical inclusion or not.

In contrast, the American Indian conception as framed by Thomas has much less masking going on. Operationally, it is more straightforward about the mechanisms of inclusion, a point in its favor. Only within the context of ongoing relationships are entities classed as persons. But conceptually, the criteria are more generous. As Thomas notes, “the Native version constructs a world that is creative and animate, dynamic and purposeful, interconnected and orderly (but only with the constant intervention of its denizens to help maintain equilibrium), unfixed and *unfinished*. Indeed, according to Native philosopher of science Gregory Cajete, human beings participate in the creation of an unfinished, living world whose ordering principle *is* creativity” (74-75). Given that the Indian world is animate, creative and constantly unfolding, one cannot be dogmatic about the boundaries, membership, or duration of a kind or relation (77-78).

In such a world where all of our actions and choices are of critical importance—indeed, they contribute to its very *making*—the utility of a world version must be judged with care and circumspection. This is an intriguing consequence of Thomas’s analysis, along with the notion of expansiveness—the

recognition of dependence and more positive assessment of dependence in this worldview. Dependence is not a flaw or constraint against which to rebel, but simply our context. This seems to me likewise intriguing and challenging—and potentially superior in its realism to prevailing alternatives. I leave these suggestions for others to consider as we continue the conversation with other panelists, and I thank you for your patience in listening to me.