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Recovering Classical Indigenous Philosophy

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Abstract

Indigenous philosophy from the 17th century and earlier is often thought to be irretrievable because of a lack of extant works. There are at least two reasons that this view is mistaken. First, it overlooks the role oral traditions play in preserving the thought of Indigenous peoples. Second, some Indigenous thinkers had their philosophical views recorded by European interlocutors shortly after contact. With these sources, the same techniques used to recover the views of philosophers like Prodicus, whose works are lost, can be applied to Indigenous thinkers. By reconstructing the philosophy of Kondiaronk, I show how this can be done.

Résumé

La philosophie autochtone du XVII^e siècle et des siècles précédents est souvent considérée comme irrécupérable en raison du manque d'œuvres existantes. Il y a au moins deux raisons pour lesquelles ce point de vue est erroné. Premièrement, cela néglige le rôle que les traditions orales ont joué dans la préservation de la pensée des peuples autochtones d'Amérique du Nord. Deuxièmement, certains penseurs autochtones ont vu leurs opinions philosophiques enregistrées par des interlocuteurs européens peu de temps après le contact. Avec ces sources, les mêmes techniques que celles utilisées pour récupérer les opinions de philosophes comme le sophiste Prodicus, dont les œuvres sont perdues, peuvent être appliquées aux penseurs autochtones. En reconstruisant une partie de la philosophie de Kondiaronk, je montre comment cela peut être fait.

Keywords: Indigenous; Kondiaronk; Prodicus; Lahontan; philosophy of the Americas

1. Introduction

In recent years, there have been increased efforts to diversify the contents of syllabi in philosophy courses through the inclusion of thinkers from traditions historically overlooked in the Western canon. Largely absent from this conversation is the inclusion of North American Indigenous philosophers, especially those from before the 20th century. A common refrain is that the lack of written works from Indigenous thinkers leaves their thought irretrievable. However, there are at least two reasons that this view is wrong. First, it ignores the role that oral traditions play in preserving the philosophical thought of Indigenous peoples in North America. Second, some thinkers had their thought recorded by European interlocutors. In this article, I argue that these sources can be drawn on to reconstruct the thought of Indigenous philosophers, and I demonstrate how this can be done.

In Section 2, I begin with a discussion of what classical Indigenous philosophy is, and a rejection of the pernicious view that Indigenous peoples in what is today North America did not have their own philosophers. In Section 3, I outline the method of reconstructing the thought of Indigenous philosophers. Those working in the history of philosophy have reconstructed the views of figures who either left no written works or whose works are lost — for instance, the thought of the Greek sophist Prodicus. The same techniques utilized in these cases can be used to reconstruct the thought of Indigenous figures — through textual analysis and comparing European records with Indigenous oral histories.

After explaining how the views of particular Indigenous philosophers can be recovered, I apply the method to partly reconstruct the political philosophy of the Wendat leader Kondiaronk. In particular, I assess the views expressed by the fictionalized version of Kondiaronk in Baron Louis-Armand de Lahontan's *New Voyages to North America* in light of Indigenous oral traditions and other records. As I focus on just one portion of Kondiaronk's philosophy, the exegesis is not comprehensive, but tentative and preliminary. Yet, this attempt to reconstruct Kondiaronk's thought is meant to be instructive as to how these methods of textual analysis can be used to recover the thought of other Indigenous philosophers.

2. Classical Indigenous Philosophy

Despite increased recognition that non-Western philosophical traditions and philosophers are deserving of attention, the pernicious belief that Indigenous peoples in the Western hemisphere did not practice philosophy lingers in academic and lay contexts (Rabb, 2021, p. 73). The main reason for this is the impression that Indigenous philosophy does not consist in reasoned arguments but instead in spiritual beliefs and practices representing “a stage in human development in which superstition and ignorance reigned supreme” (Burkhart, 2019, p. 229). Indigenous philosophy is therefore dismissed as a subject to be investigated by religious studies scholars, not philosophers.

There are a couple of reasons that the view that “Indigenous philosophy” consists only of spiritual or religious beliefs is wrongheaded. The first is that it is demonstrably false. In Indigenous societies throughout what is today North America, people used reasoned argumentation to develop and refine their views. For instance, many

Indigenous philosophers reasoned from the premise that individual existence cannot be abstracted from the space one inhabits to a dialogical conception of identity (Styers, 2017, p. 46). Similarly, some philosophical systems avoid the hard problem of consciousness by adopting panpsychism (Cordova, 2007, p. 146). Many of the ethical, metaphysical, and epistemological concepts that underpin Indigenous world-views are traceable to rational inference in this way, and are thus recognizably philosophical.

Apart from it being clear that pre-colonial Indigenous peoples had developed many of their beliefs — including those associated with philosophical subjects — through reasoned argumentation, there is a second reason to be doubtful of the claim that no classical Indigenous philosophy existed. One can develop reasoned arguments while accepting certain spiritual or religious propositions as axioms from which they reason. In the Western philosophical canon, this is typically recognized as being philosophy. Accordingly, Christian philosophy, Jewish philosophy, and Islamic philosophy are all recognized philosophical traditions that can be distinguished from theology or mere catechism. The point is that, although some Indigenous philosophy incorporates spiritual beliefs or takes them as axiomatic, this is neither unique to Indigenous philosophy nor reason to doubt its status as philosophy. The inclusion of spiritually informed propositions does not disqualify something from being philosophy. Otherwise, we would have to dismiss many seminal philosophers in the Western tradition, (e.g., Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, René Descartes, John Locke, etc.) for being insufficiently philosophical.

The claim that there were no philosophers among pre-colonial Indigenous peoples in Turtle Island (North America), and hence that there is no classic Indigenous philosophy to be recovered, is thus at best misguided. Similar arguments were historically advanced against other non-Western philosophical traditions for being too “spiritual” to be philosophy (Organ, 1975, p. 12). However, these dismissals of Eastern philosophies are likewise wrongheaded and have largely fallen out of favour. One reason that Eastern traditions have been quicker to receive their due recognition as philosophy when compared to Indigenous philosophy is the availability of sources. When one reads a text like the *Arthashastra* or Confucius’ *Analects*, it becomes immediately apparent that these are works of philosophy, which makes it hard to deny that Eastern philosophy exists. Part of why the prejudice against classical Indigenous philosophy persists is the difficulty of pointing to philosophical texts.

Generally speaking, the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island did not record information using written languages prior to colonization. Numerous Mesoamerican societies did have their own writing systems, and while philosophical material in these writings is deserving of attention, my focus is on the Indigenous societies in what is today North America. That said, some pre-colonial Indigenous peoples in North America had systems of writing. The Ojibwe used birch bark scrolls that recorded political, ceremonial, and practical information with a pictographic script (Pomedli, 2013, p. 30). Similarly, the Mi’kmaq had *gomgwejui’gasit*, a glyph-based system written on birch bark (Greenfield, 2000, p. 200). At least some Indigenous peoples in what is today Canada had systems of writing, but there are few extant pre-colonial written works.

In any case, possessing a written language is not a prerequisite for practising philosophy. Plato's Socrates famously complained that writing is an inferior method of doing philosophy when compared to conversation (Plato, 1995, p. 276a). That Indigenous peoples mainly philosophized using dialogue rather than writing cannot then be taken to mean that they were not practicing philosophy. However, it does mean that the textual sources for pre-colonial Indigenous philosophy are limited. Even if we know better than to conclude from the lack of textual sources that Indigenous societies did not practice philosophy, we might fear that their philosophical thought is forever lost to history. Europeans' initial contact with Indigenous peoples is sometimes characterized as a "documentary horizon" beyond which obtaining any information about their philosophical thought is impossible (Callicott, 1989, p. 203; McPherson & Rabb, 1993, p. ii). This is the challenge to recovering and teaching classical Indigenous philosophy. What if these philosophical traditions are irretrievable?

The lack of sources that extend beyond this documentary horizon does limit what can be achieved, but there is still much we can do to reconstruct pieces of classical Indigenous philosophy. The primary sources we have to work with can be divided into two general categories. First, there are early European records of interactions with Indigenous peoples and thinkers. These documents can be examined for information about the philosophical thought of the figures discussed in them. Second, there are Indigenous oral traditions and histories, which sometimes have information about the thought of specific figures, and can confirm information in European sources. I am not the first person to recommend using these sources to reconstruct Indigenous philosophy. Michael Pomeldi examined The Jesuit Relations to recover the views of the Indigenous people near Tadoussac in the 17th century (Pomeldi, 1985, p. 64). Conversely, Thomas W. Overholt and Baird J. Callicott (1982, p. 20) look to Ojibwe oral traditions as a source for Ojibwe philosophy. The views of Hellenistic figures have been rebuilt from scater sources, so there is hope for overcoming the documentary horizon.

So far, I have spoken of classical Indigenous philosophy in general terms, but I must stress that this is a loose designator for a diverse set of thinkers and philosophical traditions. Sometimes, "Indigenous philosophy" and Indigenous knowledge is discussed as though all Indigenous peoples share a basically similar philosophy (Absolon, 2011, p. 31; Wilson, 2008, p. 34). Although there is nothing wrong with identifying the similarities between various Indigenous philosophies, amalgamating them and overlooking their differences is too reductive. In a similar vein, the terms "Western philosophy" and "Eastern philosophy" are sometimes useful, but any attempt to distil *the* "Western philosophy" or *the* "Eastern philosophy" is doomed to fail. Like "Indigenous philosophy," the terms identify an internally diverse collection of schools and thinkers unified mainly by geography. Although Parmenides and Jeremy Bentham both belong to Western philosophy, it would be ludicrous to claim that their philosophical thought is essentially the same.

Instead of trying to reconstruct something as imprecise as "Indigenous philosophy," a more productive route is to focus on understanding the thought of particular communities or individuals. An example of reconstructing the thought of a community is Betty Bastien's work on the thought of the Blackfoot (Bastien,

2004). We can speak of the Blackfoot's philosophy as readily as we might the Roman Stoics or German Idealism, as the inquiry is focused enough to identify a distinct body of philosophical thought. Yet, even within the same community, there are philosophically relevant differences between the views of various figures. We should not expect two Blackfoot thinkers to share the exact same views any more than we would expect two German Idealists to believe all of the same things. For these reasons, it is prudent to focus on reconstructing the views of specific individuals where possible. This both recognizes their intellectual contributions and avoids over-generalization about their community.

3. Method of Reconstruction

To examine some of the methods often employed in the history of philosophy, let's turn to the example of Prodicus. Prodicus was a natural philosopher from the latter half of the 5th century BCE. None of his written works survive, and everything that is known about him comes to us from contemporaries and later commentators whose works remain. Despite our reliance on second-hand sources, historians of philosophy have reconstructed Prodicus' ethical philosophy. The situation in which we find ourselves with respect to Prodicus is analogous to Kondiaronk when it comes to sources and what we can glean from them. Thus, I argue that we can also reconstruct Kondiaronk's thought.

Our main source on Prodicus' ethical philosophy is the *Memorabilia*, written by Xenophon. Xenophon was a student of Socrates, and the *Memorabilia* is a series of dialogues about Socrates' philosophical life. In one of these fictionalized dialogues, the character of Socrates repeats a speech attributed to Prodicus about how the mythological Heracles decided on the path of virtue over the path of vice (Xenophon, 1994, p. 2.1.21). In the speech, Virtue and Vice appear before a young Heracles personified as two women. Virtue argues that one must take the path of virtue if one desires a life of honour and long-term moderate pleasures. The path of virtue is more arduous, as it requires that one develop personal virtue, which can require forgoing immediate gratification. Conversely, Vice argues that one must follow the path of vice if one desires a life of maximum pleasure and minimum hardship. The path of vice is easier, since it does not require personal development, but Vice admits that her path might lead to suffering in the long run, and to not being held in high regard by others.

The argument attributed to Prodicus in the *Memorabilia* defends a kind of moral relativism. The paths of virtue and vice are presented as equally rational options that one can choose between, with the correct answer for each person depending on what kind of life that person would prefer to have. The speech claims that there is nothing independent of what one desires for oneself that determines the normatively right way to live (Mayhew, 2011, p. xx). Having outlined what Prodicus is said to have thought in our main source on his ethical philosophy, we can ask whether he believed this.

Many contemporaries of Xenophon wrote that Prodicus was an orator and student of fellow sophist Protagoras, so the notion that he gave such a speech is believable (Mayhew, 2011, p. 5). More concretely, the speech is referenced in Plato's *Symposium*: "[a]s for our fancy intellectuals, they have written volumes praising

Heracles and other heroes (as did the distinguished Prodicus)” (Plato, 1989, p. 177b). As with Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, Plato’s *Symposium* is a fictional dialogue. The contents of the dialogue must be understood as subject to poetic licence and Socratic irony. Although not a straightforward historical record of real events, the *Symposium* is an unrelated written work that references the Heracles speech given by Prodicus. This provides us with independent confirmation that Prodicus did give a speech about Heracles, even if Plato’s passing reference to it does not indicate whether Xenophon’s account of it is accurate. More support for the claim that Prodicus gave a version of the Heracles speech comes from a scholium (marginal comment from antiquity) appended to Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (Mayhew, 2011, p. 51). The author of the scholium remarks that the speech can be found in a lost work of Prodicus’ entitled the *Horai* (“Hours” or “Seasons”).

Although there is evidence that Prodicus gave the Heracles speech, and perhaps even wrote it down, how can we know that Xenophon’s rendering of it is accurate to Prodicus’ views? One way is to compare the moral philosophy that is in the version of the Heracles speech found in the *Memorabilia* with what is known about Prodicus’ own life. Recall that Xenophon’s version of the speech indicated that Prodicus believed both the paths of virtue and vice were rational options, and that the path that one ought to choose depends on what one ultimately desires. Prodicus thus adopts a kind of ethical relativism wherein the character one should cultivate depends on what sort of life one would prefer. This kind of relativism is often taken to be characteristic of the Sophists.

Is there then any independent evidence that Prodicus adopted the moral relativism endorsed in the Heracles speech in his own life? In the *Lives of the Sophists*, Philostratus states that Prodicus “hunt[ed] well-born youths and those who came from wealthy families, so much so that he even had agents employed in this pursuit; for he had a weakness for money and was addicted to pleasure” (Philostratus, 1952, p. 39). Prodicus’ avariciousness is independently attested to in other sources from antiquity, and this pursuit of wealth is associated in the Heracles speech with the path of vice. As the speech argues, the path of vice is preferable to the path of virtue if one desires a life of maximum pleasure; the speech can be read as a defence of the historical Prodicus’ lifestyle, indicating that it reflects his actual views.

This discussion of Prodicus is meant to illustrate a process used by historians of philosophy to reconstruct the thought of particular philosophers. In this instance, we have a substantial second-hand account of Prodicus’ ethical philosophy, and by comparing its philosophical contents to other sources that attest to the fact that Prodicus gave such a speech, and those that discuss his conduct, we can confirm that it likely provides an accurate account of his philosophy. That same process can be followed to reconstruct parts of Kondiaronk’s thought from the available sources.

Chief Kondiaronk (c. 1649–1701) was a leader of the Wendat at Michilimackinac.¹ He was an accomplished orator, strategist, and statesman, who is perhaps most

¹ Kondiaronk was Tionontati by birth, a people closely affiliated with the Wendat. In the mid-17th century, the Tionontati were largely absorbed into either Iroquois or Wendat society, with Kondiaronk joining the Wendat.

famous for negotiating the Great Peace of Montreal (Sioui, 1999, p. 208). The main account of Kondiaronk's thought is a travelogue by Lahontan, *New Voyages to North America* (Baron de Lahontan, 1703). Lahontan offers a fictionalized dialogue between himself and an Indigenous philosopher called "Adario." Lahontan states that Adario is to be identified with the historical Kondiaronk, and Kondiaronk was known among the Wendat as Adario, meaning: "great and noble friend" (Sioui, 1992, p. 66). The dialogue discusses religion, the law, and morality, among other philosophical subjects.

I focus here only on one portion of Kondiaronk's political philosophy. My aim is to assess whether the perspectives on private property attributed to Kondiaronk in the dialogue are his own:

The great Lords, that you call Happy, lie expos'd to Disgrace from the King, to the detraction of a thousand sorts of Persons, to the loss of their Places, to the Contempt of their Fellow Courtiers; and in a word, their soft Life is thwarted by Ambition, Pride, Presumption and Envy. They are Slaves to their Passions, and to their King, who is the only *French* Man that can be call'd Happy, with respect to that adorable Liberty which he alone enjoys. There's a thousand of us in one Village, and you see that we love one another like Brethren; that whatever any one has is at his Neighbour's Service; that our Generals and Presidents of the Council have not more Power than any other *Huron*; that Detraction and Quarreling were never heard of among us; and in fine, that every one is his own Master, and do's what he pleases, without being accountable to another, or censur'd by his Neighbour. This, my dear Brother, is the difference between us and your Princes, Dukes, &c. And if those great Men are so Unhappy, by consequence, those of inferiour Stations must have a greater share of Trouble and perplexing Cares. (Baron de Lahontan, 1703, p. 147)

Kondiaronk argues in this passage that private property is detrimental to the Europeans' happiness. Those who have wealth find that it encourages various passions, such as ambition, pride, and envy, which prevent them from enjoying a contented existence. Kondiaronk also observes that the nobility can only keep their wealth by participating in a political system that restricts the liberty of everyone except the King. Those who lack wealth lack both liberty and the incomplete comforts the nobility enjoy. Kondiaronk compares this unfavourably to Wendat's communal conception of property.

The main interpretive difficulty of Lahontan's dialogue is the question of whether the views expressed by the character Adario can be rightly attributed to the historical Kondiaronk. Lahontan may just be using Kondiaronk to express his own positions while maintaining plausible deniability. Those who doubt that the dialogue is representative of Kondiaronk's actual views have said that it is part of a European literary tradition of dialogues with imagined Indigenous people (Ouellet, 2006, p. 57). Against this, Georges Sioui says that historical analysis shows the dialogue is "not only a reliable translation of the feelings of the voiceless Amerindian people, but an unusually accurate picture of aboriginal American ideology" (Sioui, 1992, p. 68). How then might we resolve the impasse regarding authorship? This question

is analogous to the question of whether the *Memorabilia* accurately presents Prodicus, and we can use similar methods to reach an answer.

We can first ask whether there is any basis to Lahontan's claim that he met and discussed philosophy with the real Kondiaronk. In 1688, Lahontan was commanding a detachment of French and Indigenous soldiers he brought to Michilimackinac to seek food (Allan, 1960, p. 3). During his stay, he participated in a Wendat raid against the Iroquois. He later reported to his relatives that it was then that he encountered Kondiaronk at Michilimackinac (Sioui, 1992, p. 65). The 1688 letter dispels the notion that Lahontan fabricated the character of "Adario" entirely. The writings of Lahontan's contemporaries also lend credibility to his story. Jesuit historian Father Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix claims that Kondiaronk was "brilliant in private conversations ... and we often took pleasure in irritating him to hear his retorts, which were always lively, full of wit, and irrefutable" (Sioui, 1992, p. 66). Those who met Kondiaronk agreed that he was a sharp thinker, so Lahontan's claim to have debated with him in 1688 is plausible. It remains possible that Lahontan fictionalized the contents of the encounter when he wrote his book, but there is at least evidence to support the claim that they met each other.

Having argued that Lahontan and Kondiaronk did meet, and perhaps discussed philosophy, it remains to be argued whether the views espoused by Kondiaronk in the dialogue are those of Kondiaronk. Recall that we are focused on the view, attributed to Kondiaronk, that Europeans' conception of private property is detrimental to happiness and liberty. The communal conception of property attributed to Kondiaronk does correspond to the views historically held by the Wendat (The Jesuit Relations, 2000, p. 67). Likewise, the form of political organization that Kondiaronk outlines in the dialogue square with historical reality. The Wendat had consensus-ruled communities wherein the leaders did not have constitutional authority over the other members (Sioui, 1999, p. 127). Wendat society prioritized individual liberty, and developed the tendency to sub-divide into smaller groups rather than compromise the liberty of its members. The conceptual framework that the character "Adario" is arguing from in the passage quoted above is therefore recognizably that of the Wendat.

Though we can never confirm beyond all doubt that Kondiaronk developed the arguments attributed to him by Lahontan, the textual evidence makes it quite plausible that he did. Lahontan and Kondiaronk were both in Michilimackinac in 1688, and given the testimony we have regarding Kondiaronk's penchant for sparring intellectually with European interlocutors, they may well have spoken. The strongest evidence that Lahontan's fictionalized dialogue incorporates some of Kondiaronk's actual thoughts is the extent to which the arguments attributed to Kondiaronk are reflective of the conceptual beliefs possessed by the Wendat and how their society was organized. The possibility remains that the Adario of Lahontan's dialogues is a composite character, or that Lahontan was perceptive enough to correctly describe how the Wendat conceived of the world without Kondiaronk telling him. Even if this were the case, the implication would be that Lahontan made Kondiaronk the philosophical presenter of an accurate account of an Indigenous worldview.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that classical Indigenous philosophy is a philosophical tradition deserving of greater respect and critical scrutiny. Reconstructing the thought of individual thinkers from the 17th century and earlier is possible, and doing so constitutes a modest contribution to reconciliation in Canada. To illustrate how this can be done, I have applied the same kind of analysis used to reconstruct Prodicus' moral philosophy to the Wendat philosopher Kondiaronk. The results indicate that the same techniques used by historians of philosophy to reconstitute the philosophies of figures from other eras can be applied to Indigenous philosophers from the pre-colonial period. While the findings of any research that follows this methodology would necessarily be speculative, it carries the hope of reconstructing the views of Indigenous thinkers deserving of more attention.

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