

# Environmental Ethics as Environmental Etiquette: Toward an Ethics-Based Epistemology

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An *ethics-based epistemology* is necessary for environmental philosophy—a sharply different approach from the *epistemology-based ethics* that the field has inherited, mostly implicitly, from mainstream ethics. In this paper, we try to uncover this inherited epistemology and point toward an alternative. In section two, we outline a general contrast between an ethics-based epistemology and an epistemology-based ethics. In section three, we examine the relationship between ethics and epistemology in an ethics-based epistemology, drawing extensively on examples from indigenous cultures. We briefly explore several striking implications of an ethics-based epistemology in sections four and five.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Environmental philosophers have long suspected that environmental ethics is much more than the mere extension of general ethical principles and methods to a new applied area. Accordingly, environmental philosophers have been especially intrigued by those ways in which environmental philosophy has progressively called into question substantive and methodological assumptions about ethics itself: that ethics is an affair solely of humans, or even just rational or sentient beings; that standard ethical theories can be stretched to retrofit all new ethical insights; that ethical theories, standard or not, are what we should want at all. Each of these assumptions, and more, have been called into question.

It is our view, however, that environmental ethicists have not yet gotten to the bottom of things. We have not yet uncovered the most radical of challenges that environmental philosophy poses to traditional assumptions. Environmental philosophy is most radical, we think, because it calls into question basic assumptions concerning the relationship between epistemology and ethics and, hence, basic assumptions concerning ethics itself.

We do mean basic. For example, what if environmental philosophy finally must call into question the seemingly most obvious assumption of all, that the world

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consists of a collection of more or less given facts to which we must respond, responses which ethics then systematizes and unifies? What if the actual, necessary relation is the other way around? What if the world we inhabit arises most fundamentally out of our ethical practice, rather than vice versa?

## II. TWO ETHICAL EPISTEMOLOGIES

Consider, very briefly, four features of the traditional view of the place of epistemology in ethics, what we call an “epistemology-based ethics.”<sup>1</sup> (1) *Ethical action is a response to our knowledge of the world.* Knowledge comes first; then, and only then, practice. Ethical arguments presuppose or articulate some factual situation to which the question is what our appropriate response is to be. That natural ecosystems, for example, may show integrity, stability, or beauty, as a matter of fact, is supposed to be the basis upon which we can “consider” them ethically. That animals feel pain, or are self-conscious, or have expectations that can be violated, is supposed to be the basis upon which they might be attributed rights. Indeed, to speak of a “basis” in this way is only a way of underlining the necessity of some factual appeal, some empirical starting-point. Often an object’s or system’s alleged possession of “intrinsic value” is itself supposed to be a kind of fact to which ethical action responds. That even the “possession” of value itself is thereby treated as a kind of *fact* illustrates just how taken-for-granted the fact-based model of ethics currently is.

(2) *The world is readily knowable—at least to the extent required for ethical response.* Ethicists are confident about what it is we need to know in order to determine our ethical responsibilities, and are confident that this knowledge is attainable. We can understand ecosystems; we can know, even with precision, exactly what animals do or do not feel; we can even know what things have a special property called “intrinsic value,” even though we cannot begin to cash out that notion ontologically or any other way. Even in cases where the relevant understanding is acknowledged to be far from complete, it is thought that we have enough to go on for ethical decision making—or else that the very incompleteness of our knowledge is itself a critical fact that determines ethical response. In any case, *we know what we need to know.*

(3) *Ethics is inherently an incremental and extensionist business.* If ethics is a response to the world, and the world is readily known, then ethics is likely to

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<sup>1</sup> It is almost impossible to give citations for this model in general, since it is the common assumption of nearly all contemporary philosophical work recognized as ethics, and consequently is almost never explicitly articulated. It is both immediately familiar and never spelled out. J. Baird Callicott’s recent *Earth’s Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) can perhaps be cited in this connection, particularly as his emphatically epistemology-based ethics does considerable disservice to the ethics-based epistemologies typical of indigenous philosophies that we examine below.

have a well-established core. Change and expansion are supposed to take place slowly, at the margins, and by extension from the (assumed) well-understood central models. Peter Singer's "expanding circle," for example, is quite explicitly *not* taken to be in any serious flux near its center: the whole idea is that we work out from the "given," from the reliable and established, to the less certain and more speculative. At the margins, of course, we ought to expect some surprises, but the common and given background against which any surprise must emerge is the stable and well-understood familiar world.

Even new experiences at the margins are interpreted and assimilated on the familiar models. Animals have rights, or we have duties to them, or "welfare" must be construed more broadly, or "no compromise" is now a principle to be asserted in a new area, and so on. The basic *patterns* of ethical relationship seem to be taken as "given," even at the margins.

These three assumptions lead in turn to a specific vision of the task of ethics. (4) *The task of ethics is to sort the world ethically—that is, to articulate the nature of things in ethical terms.* It is for this reason that the "considerability" question surfaces so early in the development of environmental ethics. Ethics thinks of itself as addressing the criteria for *matter*ing ethically, for "counting," and these criteria are supposed to be articulated in terms of the relevant features of the things that "count." Of course, there is room for debate about just what features are relevant, but once again it is usually supposed that the problem is merely one of making careful distinctions. We are already supposed to understand the relevant criteria. People are in, bacteria and rocks are out, and animals might be in or not depending on how much like us, and unlike bacteria or rocks, they are.<sup>2</sup>

All manner of familiar consequences follow from this model. For example, the familiar kind of careful distinction making and legalistic principle articulation is already well in view after (4). A philosophy of language emerges: descriptive rather than expressive and performative functions of language are crucial. An account of ethical failure also follows. It follows directly from (1) that the great pitfalls of ethics—the primary ways in which we fail to be ethical—are inadequacies of *belief*, or have to do with the conformity of action to belief. We may be ignorant of, or blind to, the facts. We may resist acknowledging the facts: we may even, like the vivisectionists, cut animals' vocal cords so that we do not have to hear them scream. Or we may acknowledge the facts but fail to act on our knowledge (which is why weakness of will is a topic of such interest in contemporary ethics). Still we remain in the orbit of facts.

Alternative foundational assumptions might be offered, however, which differ from the traditional assumptions *on every point*: an ethics-based epistemology, rather than an epistemology-based ethics. (1a) *Ethical action is first and foremost an attempt to open up possibilities, to enrich the world.* It is not

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<sup>2</sup> See Thomas H. Birch, "Moral Considerability and Universal Consideration," *Environmental Ethics* 15 (1993): 313–32.

an attempt to respond to the world as *already* known. On the usual view, for example, we must first know what animals are capable of, then decide on that basis whether and how we are to consider them ethically. On the alternative view, we will have no idea of what other animals are actually capable—we will not readily understand them—until we *already* have approached them ethically—that is, until we have offered them the space and time, the occasion, and the acknowledgment necessary to enter into relationship. Ethics must come *first*.

Consider the phenomenon of love in this regard. In terms of a traditional ethical epistemology, love is a difficult, embarrassing, marginal case: love is supposed to be blind, irrational, and “pathological.” In terms of an alternative ethical epistemology, however, love is paradigmatic. Love is in fact a way of knowing, but its dynamics are the reverse of the usual models. Love comes first, and opens up possibilities. Without love people may never open up enough to reveal all that they can be. In this sense, lovers *do* see what others cannot see—but the *others* are the ones who are blind. Love in this sense is already an ethical relationship. It thus stands at the beginning, at the core, of ethics itself: a venture as well as an adventure—a risk, an attitude that may (*may*, for we cannot say for sure at the beginning) lead in time to more knowledge of someone or something, wholly wild possibilities.

(2a) *Hidden possibilities surround us at all times.* The world is *not* readily knowable. People who were previously dismissed as below notice, even if “respected” in the purely formal sense, might turn out to be quite fantastic companions, lovers, adversaries, or who knows what, if offered the “space,” the invitation. Or perhaps they would choose to have nothing to do with us—a state of affairs from which we could also learn. We must *ask* them, however: we must venture something, expose ourselves too; and for any number of reasons the invitation may be declined.

The same goes for other animals and for the larger worlds beyond. There is a vast fund of experience in Midgelyan “mixed communities,” for example, in which all manner of animals, from cats, dogs, and horses to cormorants, whales, raccoons, and bees have shown unexpected powers—while some of them too, no doubt, would rather have nothing to do with us. We are still only beginning to sense the communication going on all around us: whales singing to each other across whole oceans, elephants rumbling in infra-sound across the savannahs, bees dancing their comrades to new pollens.<sup>3</sup> Even in the face of the staggering reduction of nature in modern times, wild possibilities abound. We have only begun to consider that all life on Earth might itself function in an integrated, maybe even organism-like way. Who knows what else we will yet discover? The world has barely unfolded for us.

(3a) *Ethics is pluralistic, dissonant, discontinuous—not incremental and extensionist.* If established knowledge and ethical relationships in no way

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<sup>3</sup> See Anthony Weston, *Back to Earth: Tomorrow's Environmentalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), chaps. 2 and 3.

exhaust the possibilities, then ethical *discovery* is always possible, including discoveries that may be unnerving and disruptive. We may discover that even values we thought long-established might have to be rethought and changed. Rather than emphasize the continuities (animal rights, for example, as an extension of human rights, from males to females to historically disadvantaged races and, finally, beyond the human species to, maybe, adult mammals . . .) the alternative notices that each of these revisions also upends the central and supposedly “given” models as well. If barbarians or females or even animals can have rights, then the meaning of rights holding and our understanding of rights holders themselves changes. Dissonance abounds.

A sense of familiarity and settledness characterize the tradition. The alternative needs a more uncertain and disruptive metaphor. Consider, for example, the experience of living in a foreign land. Here it is evident to us that a great deal is going on that is mysterious and perhaps must remain so. Melodies, smells, a certain tilt of the head, the line of the hills, or the way the rains start in the afternoons are all more intricate and complex than surface attention would suggest, even right next to us. In foreign lands, a certain bare courtesy is extended both ways, because both we and the natives know we are reaching across a distance. We need to be carefully attentive, always aware that there is much we do not understand, open to discovery and surprise.

This is not merely an analogy, though, but the actual state of things. We do live among different others, every day and all the time. Other humans, even those close to us, see the world their own way, have their own structures of meaning, different from our own. Even the most seemingly established relationships may have to be regularly reestablished. The analogy applies quite precisely to other animals. Recall Henry Beston’s famous words:

In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of time.<sup>4</sup>

Other nations are beings with their own structures of meaning, which we conceivably could join or at least move in concert with, but not structures that we should expect to fit neatly or smoothly with our own. What is really asked of us is courtesy, openness to surprise.

Finally, the three assumptions just outlined lead in turn to a specific vision of the tasks of ethics: (4a) *The task of ethics is to explore and enrich the world.* Hidden possibilities surround us: the task of ethics is to call them forth. Rather than sorting relatively fixed-natured things into relatively well-established categories of considerability, thus not just ruling some potential consideranda

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Beston, *The Outermost House* (New York: Viking, 1976), p. 25.

*in* but also—and quite crucially for the traditional conception of things—ruling a great many potential consideranda *out*, what is asked of us, insofar as we can manage it, is an open-ended, nonexclusive consideration of everything: people, bacteria, rocks, animals, everything, insofar as we can.

Tom Birch calls this kind of consideration *universal consideration*. He offers an elegant and (it seems to us) unanswerable argument for its necessity. Because the self-proclaimed concern of ethics is to discover what things in the world demand practical respect, then we must *for that reason alone*, he says, “consider” them in the most fundamental way: by paying close, careful, and persistent attention. Thus, all things must be considerable in this basic and unavoidable sense. Indeed, rather than any new potential considerandum having to meet a burden of proof, universal consideration requires us to reverse the usual burden of proof as we approach others in the world. “Others are now taken as valuable, even though we may not yet know how or why, until they are proved otherwise.”<sup>5</sup> Actually, even more deeply, universal consideration requires us not merely to extend this kind of benefit of the doubt but actively to take up the case, so to speak, for beings so far excluded or devalued. Once again, ethics is primary: ethics opens the way to knowledge, epistemology is value-driven, not vice versa.

All manner of consequences follow from this alternative model. Once again, for example, a philosophy of language emerges: Rather than descriptive accuracy, the alternative will draw upon the evocative, expressive, and performative aspects of language. This theme is taken up in the next section. The alternative also has direct implications for the great pitfalls of ethics—the ways in which we fail to be ethical. On our view, these are inadequacies of *etiquette*, failures of *courtesy*. Blind to the possibilities right next to us, we may never know what we are missing, and we may close them down or even destroy them as a result.<sup>6</sup>

### III. CEREMONIAL WORLDS

In this section, we examine in more detail the relationship between etiquette and epistemology in an ethics—or etiquette-based epistemology. Although we believe that *all* epistemologies are at least implicitly value or ethics-based, we focus here on examples drawn from indigenous cultures, since the ethics-based nature of epistemology is most clearly exemplified in them.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Birch, “Moral Considerability,” p. 328.

<sup>6</sup> This discussion is, of course, only the briefest sketch, and leaves many questions unaddressed. Could ethics-based epistemology and epistemology-based ethics each be appropriate at different times or in different spheres, for example? (Maybe.) Is “care” ethics closer to an ethics-based epistemology than traditional ethics? (Again, maybe: this strand does emerge in some care ethicists, although there is a strong strand of epistemology-based care ethics as well.) These are questions for another place.

<sup>7</sup> The indigenous ideas on which we draw are filtered—indeed, double-filtered in cases where we work from secondary sources—through the conceptual lens of the Western-defined problematics in environmental ethics that we address in this paper. We do not claim to understand

Referring to the work of the Canadian Inuit philosopher Gordon Christie, Leroy Meyer and Tony Ramirez argue that “one ought not to put too much stock in the word ‘philosophy.’ . . . [T]here are alternative ways of intelligently engaging the world. To construe one’s thinking in terms of belief is characteristic of a particular kind of world view and it remains to be seen whether those who share an indigenous world view conceive of experience in such an overtly intellectualized manner.”<sup>8</sup>

Walter Ong and others have linked the visual metaphor of knowing—as in the term *world view*, as used to refer to a people’s fundamental *beliefs* about the world—with the advent of the written word. Whereas “sight presents surfaces,” Ong says, “sound reveals interiors” and “signals the present use of power, since sound must be in active production in order to exist at all.” In a sound-oriented culture, “the universe [is] something one respond[s] to, as to a voice, not something merely to be inspected.”<sup>9</sup> Words on the page no longer reveal interiors, they no longer signal the present use of power. Words are now *objects*; they are inert, in themselves lifeless. They become signs, symbols of something else. Words come to refer primarily to beliefs, systems of thought. Sam Gill reports (as have many others) that nonliterate people are often highly critical of writing. He says, however, that he does

. . . not believe that it is actually writing that is at the core of their criticism. The concern is with certain dimensions of behavior and modes of thought that writing tends to facilitate and encourage. And these dimensions are linked to the critical, semantical, encoding aspects of language. . . . We interpret texts to discern systems of thought and belief, propositional or historical contents, messages communicated. Put more generally, we seek the information in the text. We tend to emphasize code at the expense of behavior, message at the expense of the performance and usage contexts.<sup>10</sup>

The written word conspires with the visual metaphor to turn the world into a passive object for human knowledge and to focus our attention on language as a sign system primarily designed to encode beliefs.

In a number of articles, Sam Gill has attempted to reinstate the fundamental nature of the *performative* function of language, using Navajo prayer as a case

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indigenous thought as that thought lives in indigenous worlds. The *only* real authorities on indigenous thought are indigenous peoples themselves. We only claim that this thought *as we understand it* sheds light on current problems in environmental ethics.

<sup>8</sup> Leroy N. Meyer and Tony Ramirez, “‘Wakinyan Hotan’ (‘The Thunderbeings call out’): The Inscrutability of Lakota/Dakota Metaphysics,” in Sylvia O’Meara and Douglas A. West, eds., *From Our Eyes: Learning from Indigenous People* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1996), p. 104.

<sup>9</sup> Walter J. Ong, S.J., “World as View and World as Event,” *American Anthropologist* 71 (1969): 63–67.

<sup>10</sup> Sam Gill, “Holy Book in Nonliterate Traditions: Toward the Reinvention of Religion,” in Sam Gill, *Native American Religious Action: A Performance Approach to Religion* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), pp. 139–40.

study. Invariably, when he asks Navajo elders what prayers *mean*, they tell him “not what messages prayers carry, but what prayers *do*.” Further, “the person of knowledge in Navajo tradition holds that [theology, philosophy, and doctrine] are ordinarily to be discouraged. Such concerns are commonly understood by Navajos as evidence that one totally misunderstands the nature of Navajo religious traditions.”<sup>11</sup>

Generalizing from his analysis of prayer acts to religious practice generally, Gill asserts that “the importance of religion as it is practiced by the great body of religious persons for whom religion is a way of life [is] a way of creating, discovering, and communicating worlds of meaning largely through ordinary and common actions and behavior.”<sup>12</sup>

We would like to explore the possibility of generalizing even further, arguing that the performative dimension of language be understood as fundamental—not just in obviously religious settings, but *generally*. Perhaps then we can understand the full import of Myer and Ramirez’s assertion that there are alternative ways of intelligently engaging the world, alternatives to construing one’s thinking in terms of belief. We *do* things with words. Foremost among these performative functions is the creation of what we call the *ceremonial worlds* within which we live. Other performative functions of language are possible only within these ceremonial worlds—promise making, for instance, is possible only within an accepted set of social conventions, as is the progress achieved within science.<sup>13</sup>

Take, for example, Diamond Jenness’s report of an unnamed Carrier Indian of the Bulkley River who says: “The white man writes everything down in a book so that it might not be forgotten; but our ancestors married the animals, learned their ways, and passed on the knowledge from one generation to another.”<sup>14</sup> His ancestors passed down the means of creating, or recreating, the worlds, the ceremonial worlds, within which they lived—the stories, the ceremonies, the rituals, the daily practices. They passed down modes of action, which when written down come to be understood as information. Euro-Americans want to know what beliefs are encoded in the utterances of indigenous peoples; they want to treat these utterances as mirrors of indigenous worlds. In doing so, however, we may be asking the wrong question. In fact, these utterances function primarily to *produce* these worlds. Euro-Americans tend to be concerned with ontology, correct descriptions of indigenous worlds. Many indigenous people, on the other hand, are concerned with the right relationship to those beings that populate their worlds, they are concerned with mindfulness, “respect.” It is this suggestion that we wish to explore in greater depth here.

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<sup>11</sup> Sam Gill, “One, Two, Three: The Interpretation of Religious Action,” in Gill, *Native American Religious Action*, pp. 162–63, 151.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>13</sup> These examples make it clear, we hope, that the term *ceremonial worlds* is not intended to refer to ceremonies such as baptisms and sun dances that occur within cultures.

<sup>14</sup> Diamond Jenness, “The Carrier Indians of the Bulkley River,” *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin*, no. 133 (1943): 540.

N. Scott Momaday, in justly famous words, says: “It seems to me that in a sense we are all made of words; that our most essential being consists in language. It is the element in which we think and dream and act, in which we live our daily lives. There is no way in which we can exist apart from the morality of a verbal dimension.”<sup>15</sup> Momaday is speaking not of sets of *beliefs* by which people constitute themselves, but more fundamentally of performance, enactment, the bringing into being of one’s identity by means of action and practice, primarily *verbal*. It is the difference, for example, between the sacred as *object* of knowledge or belief (and, derivatively, of acts of faith and adoration) and sacramental *practice*—a matter of comportment, which brings into being a world, a ceremonial world, around it.

Ceremonial worlds are not fantasy worlds. We do, of course, experience the world. Experience is taken up into ceremonial worlds. It is part of the self-correcting feedback loop that makes it possible for the day-to-day activities of food gathering, child rearing, shelter building and so on to take place, to succeed, not only on the terms set by the world, but within the context of a richly-textured ceremonial world. In such a world, as Paul Shepard has observed, “everyday life [is] inextricable from spiritual significance and encounter,” “natural things are not only themselves but a speaking.”<sup>16</sup>

If language is performative, and if we have our being and identity fundamentally within ceremonial worlds, then the coherence we should be listening for is not merely the logical coherence of one sentence with another, one belief with another, but something more like the harmonic coherence of one note with another. Practices, including linguistic practices, create ceremonial songs of the world, worlds of meaning, within ecological niches. Within these ceremonial songs of the world language is a mode of *interaction* with the world. As Henry Sharp has put it, “symbols, ideas, and language . . . are not passive ways of perceiving a determined positivist reality but a mode of interaction shared between [humans] and their environment.”<sup>17</sup>

Sacramental *practice* is the key—not the *sacred* as understood by ontologists. Ceremonial practice defines the world in which we live and work. The ontology of one’s world is a kind of residue from one’s ethical practice and the modes of attaining knowledge associated with that practice. This residue is highly prized, and receives intense scrutiny, in Euro-American cultures, but etiquette is the fundamental dimension of our relationship to, and understanding of, the world. Ontology is a kind of picture, or metaphor, of ethical practice.

Moving away from epistemology-based ethics and toward an ethics-based epistemology, we move closer to an older sense of the word *knowledge*: knowl-

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<sup>15</sup> N. Scott Momaday, “The Man Made of Words,” in Sam Gill, *Native American Traditions: Sources and Interpretations* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1983), p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1982), pp. 6 and 9.

<sup>17</sup> Henry S. Sharp, *The Transformation of Bigfoot: Maleness, Power, and Belief among the Chipewyan* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), p. 144.

edge as intimacy and reciprocity. Contrary to the emphasis some place on the *constructed* nature of the worlds we live in, reflected in the catch phrase “It’s words all the way down,” we suggest a very different emphasis: “It’s *world* all the way *up*”—even into the language of the ceremonial worlds we have been discussing.

The poet Robert Bringhurst speaks of poetry as “knowing freed from the agenda of possession and control.” He understands poetry as “knowing in the sense of stepping in tune with being, hearing and echoing the music and heartbeat of being.”<sup>18</sup> A friend says of Indian Paintbrush—a plant we know well from the American West—that it “speaks the soil.” Its palette, she says, varies with the mineral composition of the soil.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, language is most fundamentally an expression of the world—it “speaks the world.” Language is rooted in being, rooted in the world as are we who speak forth that world in our language. Our language is a mode of interaction with, and hence a mode of knowing, that world. Knowing can take shape as a form of domination and control. It can also take shape as a way of “stepping in tune with being.”

Though the epistemologies of modernism have detached themselves from the world—treating the nonhuman world and even the human world as objects of domination and control—and though the postmodern view of language and self (the self as solipsistic maker of worlds of words) to a large extent reflects this detachment, we and our languages are fundamentally *of* the world. Before they convey information, before they are assertions with “truth values,” our words are a welling up of the world. The more-than-human world<sup>20</sup> bursts forth in multiple songs of the world—human songs in a more-than-human world, songs rooted in, and expressive of, that world. They carry the power and energy of that world.

Ceremonial worlds, then, embody *ethics-based epistemologies*. As a result, they have the potential to open up the hidden possibilities of the world, possibilities shut down by epistemologies driven by values of domination and control. Traditional epistemology-based ethics, as we have seen, tend to keep these hidden possibilities hidden, thereby effectively blocking any ethical relationship premised on them. In setting out criteria of moral considerability, contemporary epistemology-based environmental ethics is engaged (even if implicitly) at least as much in domination and control as it is in the liberation of heretofore ethically disenfranchised “citizens” of the land community.<sup>21</sup>

The centrality of the notion of “respect” for nature is pervasive in indigenous cultures and underscores the rich possibilities inherent in opting for an ethic

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Bringhurst, “Everywhere Being is Dancing, Knowing is Known,” *Chicago Review* 39 (1993): 138.

<sup>19</sup> Irene Klaver (personal communication).

<sup>20</sup> This term is from David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996). The term, as used here, has primary reference to the wider biological dimensions in which we are embedded (see note 38).

<sup>21</sup> This point is well-argued in Birch, “Moral Considerability.”

that opens up the hidden possibilities of the world. To Euro-American ears, “respect” may have overtones of hierarchically structured relationships, or it might have a Kantian flavor of obedience to moral law. But to indigenous ears it points to an epistemological-ethical complex the central concept of which is *awareness* of all that is, an awareness that is simultaneously epistemological and ethical, as Carol Geddes explained in response to a question concerning the meaning of the indigenous notion of respect: “I asked a similar question of someone who knows the Tlingit language very well. Apparently it does not have a very precise definition in translation—the way it is used in English. It is more like awareness. It is more like knowledge and that is a very important distinction, because it is not like a moral law, it is more like something that is just a part of your whole awareness.”<sup>22</sup>

The pluralistic, dissonant, and discontinuous (vs. incremental and extensionist) nature of such an ethic is also richly exemplified by indigenous cultures. Indigenous people not only acknowledge but *celebrate* the differences that exist among the various indigenous peoples in truly remarkable ways, ways that have inclined us to prefer the terms *ceremonial worlds* and *songs of the world* to *world views*, which suggests the idea of a set of *beliefs* about how the world actually *is*. Belief figures in indigenous worlds rather more obliquely than is suggested by the term *world view*. In indigenous worlds epistemology is, once again, *ethics-based*, and, given the notion of “respect” that underlies indigenous ceremonial worlds, a richly pluralistic set of worlds unfolds.

#### IV. REDUCTION AND INVITATION

In sections four and five, we pick out two aspects of our reconceived ethical epistemology for particular emphasis: invitation in this section and narrative in the next. Our aim in doing so is twofold. First, both themes illustrate and deepen the practical turn that the alternative ethical epistemology requires. Practice is no longer some application of ethical knowledge: it is now *constitutive of ethics itself*, our very mode of access to the world’s possibilities. Second, conversely, the alternative epistemology also helps to ground these themes and practices themselves. These are not merely specific topics, disjunct from each other, but connected and central to the field as we reconceive it. These themes both exemplify an ethics-based epistemology and are highlighted and required by it.

“Etiquette” is a genuine means of *discovery*. As we said above, we oppose the usual view that puts knowledge of animals, for instance, before any possible (serious, intellectually respectable) ethical response to them. On our view, we can have no idea of what other animals are actually capable *until* we approach them ethically. Now we need to spell out this reversal more carefully.

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<sup>22</sup> Carol Geddes, panel discussion by Yukon First Nations people on the topic “What is a good way to teach children and young adults to respect the land?” transcript in Bob Jickling, ed., *Environment, Ethics, and Education: A Colloquium* (Whitehorse: Yukon College, 1996), p. 46.

To begin with, certain kinds of self-fulfilling prophecies turn out to be crucial in ethics. There is, in particular, a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy in which one of the main effects of the “prophecy” is to reduce someone or something in the world—to make that person or thing less than they or it are or could be, to diminish some part of the world’s richness and depth and promise—and in which this reduction in turn feeds back not only to justify the original prophecy but also to perpetuate it. This process is therefore *self-validating* reduction. There are all too many examples. Animals reduced to pitiful or hostile vestiges of their former selves, whose incapacities and hostility are then taken to justify exploitation or further violence. The land itself, scourged, deliberately desacralized (Yahweh even commands the Israelites to destroy the ancient world’s sacred groves), subdivided, ravaged, then of course has very little of the stability, integrity, or beauty that might give it any kind of noninstrumental value. Cut down the sacred groves and you succeed in driving the sacred out of this world.<sup>23</sup>

To break this cycle of “reduction,” it is necessary to invoke a parallel cycle of “invitation”—indeed, quite precisely, self-validating invitation. Here the kind of practice asked of us is to venture something, to offer an invitation to, or to open a possibility toward, another being or some part of the world, and see what comes of it. We are called, in fact, to a kind of etiquette once again, but here in an experimental key: the task is to create the space within which a response can emerge or an exchange coevolve.

*Trust*, for example, is crucial. Think, for instance, of how we approach children, or students: already offering trust and love. This approach is what enables them to grow into it. We could even define a good teacher as someone who offers that kind of respect “up front,” and for all of his or her charges (hence, it is also “universal,” returning to Birch’s notion of universal consideration).

Here, then, the reversal from an epistemology-based ethics to an ethics-based epistemology becomes most evident. “Invitation” in this sense is not an assessment of something’s value based upon an inventory—even the most open-minded or objective inventory—of the thing’s present characteristics. The point, once again, is that those present characteristics do not exhaust the thing’s possibilities. Knowledge does not and cannot come first; first must come the invitation. Consequently, invitation cannot represent some formal kind of respect, but rather an experimental, open-ended and sometimes even personally risky kind of offering.

Birch’s insistence that universal consideration “reverse the usual burden of proof” prefigures this same logic. We suggest that this reversal is not merely a matter of epistemological caution. It is a matter of setting the dynamics of relationship going in a different direction. For the very necessity to “prove oneself” may prove debilitating, may make its own satisfaction impossible.

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<sup>23</sup> See Anthony Weston, “Self-Validating Reduction: Toward a Theory of the Devaluation of Nature,” *Environmental Ethics* 18 (1996): 115–32.

Precisely that demand already represents a way of closing ourselves off from the beings in question. Human beings trip over their own feet when treated with such distance and skepticism, when put into question in this way, and there is no reason to expect other animals to do any better, especially when many animals are exquisitely more sensitive to the affective environment than we are. Conversely, though it may seem paradoxical, removing the “burden” of proof may be precisely what is necessary if it is to be met. Once again, only in this way are we likely to discover what kind of relationship actually is possible. To “invite,” then, is not merely to make a space for something, to let it in: it is, literally, bringing new possibilities to *life*. Without it, without venturing real-world invitations, we cannot begin to know what the real possibilities are.

There are many styles of invitation. Sometimes what we need most of all to do is to give a child or animal or plant or river *time*: time to grow to its natural lifespan, at its own tempo. “Invitation” in the case of non-sentient beings—rocks, for example—may have to move at their tempo: millions of years, perhaps. Or perhaps not. Indigenous traditions generally consider rocks rather tricky beings. Places, buildings, communities can be more or less inviting: we need to *plan* for what Mary Midgley calls the “mixed community.” Considering—inviting—other animals in this sense, for example, partly means designing places and media where we can meet each other halfway. Sometimes it is as simple as designing places that they and we can safely share.

The theme of environmental etiquette is actually a major subtheme of environmental writing already. An ethics-based epistemology brings this strand into focus. Grizzly tracker Doug Peacock insists upon what he calls “interspecific tact.” Wendell Berry speaks of an “etiquette” of nature. Calvin Martin, citing a global range of native practices, speaks of “courtesy.” Gary Snyder writes of “grace.” Birch writes of “generosity of spirit” along with “considerateness.” All of these terms have their home in a discourse of manners and personal bearing. Thus, to enter the realm of “invitation” calls us to a kind of deftness, understatement, circumspection: points back toward something very close to us, bound up with who we are and how we immediately bear ourselves toward others and in the world.

Animal trainer and writer Vicki Hearne visits an animal training facility to observe Washoe, one of the chimpanzees trained to use American Sign Language. In a remarkable passage, she describes how she ends up observing the people instead.

There were roughly three categories of people going in and out of the main compound. There was the group that included trainers, handlers, and caretakers, there were Hollywood types of one sort and another and there were academics who were there mostly because of the presence of the signing chimpanzees. I realized that I was able, without consciously thinking about it, accurately and from several hundred yards away to identify which group anyone who came in belonged to. . . .

The handlers, I noticed, walked in with a soft, acute, 380-degree awareness: they were receptively establishing . . . acknowledgment of and relationships with all of the several hundred pumas, wolves, chimps, spider monkeys and Galapagos tortoises. Their ways of moving fit into the spaces shaped by the animals' awareness.

Surely, we want to add, for the very same reason, the handlers' behavior opened up the possibility of response. These were the people, after all, who drew out Washoe's language abilities, not the academics.

The Hollywood types moved . . . with vast indifference to where they were and might as well have been on an interior set with flats painted with pictures of tortoises or on the stage of a Las Vegas nightclub. They were psychically intrusive, and I remembered Dick Koehler [an animal trainer and writer] saying that you could count on your thumbs the number of actors, directors and so on who could actually respond meaningfully to what an animal is doing.

The academics didn't strut in quite that way, but they were nonetheless psychically intrusive and failed to radiate the intelligence the handlers did . . . They had too many questions, too many hidden assumptions about their roles as observer. I am talking about nice, smart people, but good handlers don't "observe" animals in this way, . . . with that stare that makes almost all animals a bit uneasy.<sup>24</sup>

This critique is very precisely put, and goes to the heart of the re-vision we have proposed in these pages. Our task is not to "observe" at all—that again is a legacy of the vision of ethics as belief-centered—but rather to *participate*. The first condition of participation is acknowledgment, actually sharing a world with other creatures. About some people who do well with animals or children, where honesty is everything, we sometimes say that they "have a way" with animals or children, as if it were some magical trait that one either is blessed with or not. This characterization misses the point. It is not magic, only etiquette, starting with that profound kind of "participation-as-acknowledgment."

Part of the upshot, then, is a shift entirely out of the preoccupations of contemporary environmental-ethical debate. Right now most of the combatants are confident that we are hot on the trail of formal principles and even a theory of animal rights or environmental ethics. Yet it may after all be our *compartment* that is the single most crucial thing. Self-validating invitation is a process: it takes time. It is certainly not the same as "just being nice." Again, it is actual, practical etiquette. When an animal looks at you, return the look. Speak back; use real names; touch. These actions are basic, fundamentally a matter of instinctive responses, in the body, below or beyond the level where conscious resolution can make a difference—except slowly and painfully too, over time.

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<sup>24</sup> Vicki Hearne, *Adam's Task* (New York: Knopf, 1986), pp. 229–30.

Certainly, self-conscious “niceness” is the *last* thing we need: better simply to be oblivious. Consider what things are like for the animal: what “communication,” for example, would really be for a herring gull or a dolphin. Consider Jim Nollman jamming with orcas, using musical media which all cetaceans seem to prefer, paddling out to them in his floating rhythm section, thus in a way that allows them to decline encounter entirely or to break it off whenever they wish.<sup>25</sup> Could *this kind of courtesy* just possibly be the environmental-philosophical challenge of the future?

## V. SONGS OF THE EARTH

When indigenous peoples are presented with what Euro-Americans would call *beliefs* or *world views* different from their own, they tend to respond not with an inquiry into which are *true* but by saying that “they tell different stories than we do.”<sup>26</sup> In this section, we focus on the *narrative* component of indigenous ceremonial worlds.

As Carol Geddes says, in explaining the difference between Western epistemology-based ethics grounded in scientific knowledge of the nonhuman world and indigenous thought on right relationship with the nonhuman world:

We would never have a subject called environmental ethics; it is simply part of the story. . . . Too many people say, well let’s take lessons from First Nations people, let us find out some of their rules, and let us try and adopt some of those rules. . . . But it is not something that you can understand through rules. It has got to be through the kind of consciousness that growing up understanding the narratives can bring to you. That is where it is very, very difficult, because people have become so far removed from understanding these kinds of things in a narrative kind of way.<sup>27</sup>

In indigenous stories, knowledge follows upon correct behavior, proper etiquette; they clearly illustrate an ethics-based epistemology. Stories are *inviting*. They *invite* the telling of other stories, other songs of the world. They invite others into the stories—human and nonhuman, the whole land community.

Theory is not inconsistent with storied understanding of self, community, and world. Indeed, as philosophers and sociologists of science have amply demonstrated, theories are fully intelligible only when embedded in stories—at the very least, in stories that exemplify in actual cases the application of scientific concepts, laws, and theories (what Thomas Kuhn calls “paradigm applications”), but also, and more importantly for our purposes, in the wider

<sup>25</sup> Jim Nollman, *Dolphin Dreamtime* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> Conversations with those involved in the Native Philosophy Project bear this out. See Geddes, panel discussion, in Jickling, *Environment, Ethics, and Education*, pp. 32–33.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

cultural stories that define us as individuals and define the cultures within which we live and come to understand ourselves. The storied nature of indigenous knowledge shows clearly that indigenous knowledge is grounded in ethical practice, that indigenous epistemology is ethics-based. In general, it seems that stories provide a more nuanced, “ecological” understanding of our place in the world—including our *ethical* place. Stories are the real homes of so-called thick moral concepts, concepts in which evaluation and description are so intertwined as to be conceptually inseparable. They *exemplify* what theory cannot—namely, as Lee Hester says, that in addition to the “true” statements that can be made about things, things have their *own* truth.<sup>28</sup> To say that everything has its *own* truth (if we understand Hester correctly) is not so much a theoretical claim about the world as it is an expression of the thought that unless we extend a very basic courtesy to things in our attempts to understand them, we cannot arrive at an understanding of them *or* ourselves that makes *sense*, that makes sense of our lives, our cultures, our relationship to all that is.

As environmental ethicists, then, we might begin to explicitly discover and acknowledge the stories within which we think about environmental ethics. Although we know that theories are deeply shaped by personal and cultural values and that these values are deeply shaped by stories—that is, they are carried and propagated by the stories that define us—this understanding is not often reflected in practice; nor is it reflected in our meta-level analyses of practice. Articles in environmental ethics literature, including this one,<sup>29</sup> do not first invoke worlds within which discussion might meaningfully proceed. The implicit assumption is that we can profitably discuss these matters without defining and locating the ceremonial worlds and stories within which our discussions proceed. We speak as though *from* no world at all; and we presumptuously speak *for* all worlds.

An elder telling Papago origin stories at a meeting about educational programs for indigenous people constructs a world in which discussion can meaningfully proceed.<sup>30</sup> Yukeoma begins his argument for why Hopi children shouldn't attend white schools by “speaking within the framework of the Hopi origin saga and its prophecies.”<sup>31</sup> Most of our own culture's stories, however, touch on our biological and ecological existence only incidentally. Still, our existence is

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<sup>28</sup> In conversation at the Native Philosophy Project.

<sup>29</sup> With this admission, we acknowledge that we speak of indigenous worlds from the quite different world of academic philosophy. One reviewer worried quite rightly about what he or she called “performative contradiction” in this regard. Fair enough. We are indeed trying to cross a formidable boundary here, to speak of things in an academic voice that truly calls for the voice of ceremony and song, a personal stance more than an intellectual attitude. We accept the awkwardness and clumsiness (indigenous people might see it as irony) of the attempt. Better this than the (at present) only alternative: silence. May those who come later find the way easier.

<sup>30</sup> Sam Gill, “The Trees Stood Deep Rooted,” in *Native American Religious Action*, p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Nabokov, “Present Memories, Past History,” in Calvin Martin, ed., *The American Indian and the Problem of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 147.

deeply ecological, and our cultural identities should reflect it, as do those of indigenous peoples. “The mythtellers speak of the powers *in relation to* each other, and with an eye to the whole ecology, not separable functions of it.”<sup>32</sup>

Jeannette Armstrong adds an ecological dimension to Momaday’s thought that “we are all made of words”: “The Okanagan word for ‘our place on the land’ and ‘our language’ is the same. The Okanagan language is thought of as the ‘language of the land.’ This means that the land has taught us our language. The way we survive is to speak the language that the land offered us as its teachings. . . . We also refer to the land and our bodies with the same root syllable. . . . We are our land/place.”<sup>33</sup>

We find a Euro-American echo of this connection between language, land, and self in Conrad Aiken’s words: “The landscape and the language are the same. / And we ourselves are language and are land.”<sup>34</sup> The landscapes that shape Euro-American identities are mostly human landscapes, landscapes of human culture and humanly transformed nature—broken landscapes that mirror our own brokenness. It has not always been so and is even now not so for perhaps most indigenous peoples. The *deepest* sources of personal and cultural identity are the ecological and geological landscapes that shape and sustain us. This identity, and our present loss, is given voice in what are surely Momaday’s most memorable words:

East of my grandmother’s house the sun rises out of the plain. Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk.<sup>35</sup>

These unbroken landscapes are characterized by their integrity. As Barry Lopez has put it, the “landscape is organized according to principles or laws or tendencies beyond human control. It is understood to contain an integrity that is beyond human analysis and unimpeachable.”<sup>36</sup> It is this integrity, beyond

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<sup>32</sup> Sean Kane, *Wisdom of the Mythtellers* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1994), p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> Jeannette Armstrong, “Keepers of the Earth,” in *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, ed. Theodore Roszak et al. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), p. 323.

<sup>34</sup> Conrad Aiken, quoted in Edith Cobb, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 67.

<sup>35</sup> N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), p. 113.

<sup>36</sup> Barry Lopez, “Landscape and Narrative,” in *Crossing Open Ground* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 66.

human analysis and unimpeachable, that marks the land as sacred for most indigenous peoples. The “sacred” (for example, the Lakota *wakan tanka*, “great mysterious”) is the more-than-human quality of *this* world, not a being transcendent to the world. A Lakota asked older Lakota about the meaning and origin of the term *wakan tanka* and received this story as his answer:

Way back many years ago, two men went walking. It was on the prairies. As they walked, they decided, “Let’s go up the hill way towards the west; let’s see what’s over the hill.”

So they walked and they came to the top of this hill and they looked west and it was the same. Same thing as they saw before; there was nothing. They just kept going like that, all day and it was the same. They came to a big hill and there was another big hill further back. Finally they stopped and they said, “You know, this is Wakan Tanka.”<sup>37</sup>

In *this* sense of “sacred,”<sup>38</sup> it is possible that even evolutionary biology and ecology may provide us with some compelling myths of origin, for they portray the world as more-than-human in a way that may evoke an inclusive sense of kinship with the world around us. Nature’s complexity, its generosity, and its communicative ability make it possible for us to once again experience the deep unity of the sacred and the natural. The particular virtues of specifically human being are embedded in natural mystery and nourished by a broader, deeper, more powerful, and enduring earth matrix.

But these biological stories are quite abstract: they don’t speak to us of the particularities of our homes, our places on Earth. Within indigenous cultures, myths of origin and other stories are creations and renewals of ceremonial worlds that tie cultural identity, even survival itself, to specific landscapes. Simon Ortiz, in “Survival This Way,” from *A Good Journey*, writes:

Survival, I know how this way.  
This way, I know.  
It rains.  
Mountains and canyons and plants  
grow.  
We traveled this way,

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<sup>37</sup> Elaine Jahner, “The Spiritual Landscape,” in D. M. Dooling and Paul Jordan-Smith, eds., *I Become Part of It: Sacred Dimensions in Native American Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 193.

<sup>38</sup> This is a sense of the sacred that resonates well with Rolston’s view that “there comes a point in environmental ethics when we ask about our *sources*, not just our *resources*. The natural environment is discovered to be the womb in which we are generated and which we really never leave. That is the original meaning of *nature*, from the Latin *natans*, giving birth, Mother Earth.” Holmes Rolston, III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), pp. 197–98. See also Jim Cheney, “Naturalizing the Problem of Evil,” *Environmental Ethics* 19 (1997): 299–313.

gauged our distance by stories  
 and loved our children.  
 We taught them  
 to love their births.  
 We told ourselves over and over  
 again,  
 "We shall survive this way.

Another of Ortiz's poems concludes: "My son touches the root carefully, / aware of its ancient quality. / He lays his soft, small fingers on it / and looks at me for information. / I tell him: wood, an old root, / and around it, the earth, ourselves."<sup>39</sup>

Euro-Americans, too, have stories that define us in relationship to the land. One such tale is Aldo Leopold's "Marshland Elegy," in his *A Sand County Almanac*, which ends:

And so they live and have their being—these cranes—not in the constricted present, but in the wider reaches of evolutionary time. Their annual return is the ticking of the geologic clock. Upon the place of their return they confer a peculiar distinction. Amid the endless mediocrity of the commonplace, a crane marsh holds a paleontological patent of nobility, won in the march of eons. . . . The sadness discernible in some marshes arises, perhaps, from their once having harbored cranes. Now they stand humbled, adrift in history.<sup>40</sup>

"Marshland Elegy" helps define many who live in the upper Midwest in relationship to the geologic and ecosystemic legacy of the last Wisconsin Ice, as a prairie/wetland people. The elegy also haunts us—it is a story of loss that fits our cultural temper. It is a fair question whether our religions of loss and redemption are in some way tied to the mutual estrangement of the natural, the personal, and the sacred in Western culture.

The search for roots can take other shapes than that of a search for redemption in the mode of a search for the "Truth" of one's origin and identity. As Lee Hester recounts,<sup>41</sup> the Choctaw people migrated long ago to Mississippi carrying the bones of their ancestors with them. When they reached Mississippi, they are said to have built the mound of *Nanih Waiyah* to house these bones. Yet, *Nanih Waiyah* is also said to be the great "Productive Mound" from which all people emerged. From the point of view of the "One (literal) Truth," there seems to be a contradiction—the *new* burial mound *couldn't* be the Choctaw place of *origin*, emergence. From the point of view of Choctaw *practice*, however, a different meaning of emergence and origins arises.

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<sup>39</sup> Simon Ortiz, *A Good Journey*, collected in *Woven Stone* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), pp. 167–68 and 202.

<sup>40</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), pp. 101–03.

<sup>41</sup> Personal communication.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The following remarks by the anthropologist Henry Sharp sum up some of the salient features of the ethics-based epistemology that we have elaborated in this paper, as well as some of the dangers inherent in an epistemology-based ethics:

We are now conditioned to accept that the symbols, ideas, and language of alien cultures are ways of knowing the environment within which they dwell, but we have conveniently managed to subordinate the significance of that understanding to our quest for objectivity. These things are not passive ways of perceiving a determined positivist reality but a mode of interaction shared between the *dene* and their environment. All animate life interacts and, to a greater or lesser degree, affects the life and behavior of all other animate forms. In their deliberate and splendid isolation, the Chipewyan interact with all life in accordance with their understanding, and the animate universe responds.

White Canada does not come silently and openly into the bush in search of understanding or communion, it sojourns briefly in the full glory of its colonial power to exploit and regulate all animate being and foremost of all, the *dene*. It comes asserting a clashing causal certainty in the fundamentalist exercise of the power of its belief. It talks too loudly, its posture is wrong, its movement harsh and graceless; it does not know what to see and it hears nothing. Its presence brings a stunning confusion heard deafeningly in a growing circle of silence created by a confused and disordered animate universe.<sup>42</sup>

Swaggering, talking too loud, not knowing how to listen, this very (often innocent) clumsiness we now reconceive as *the* fundamental ethical failure: failure to acknowledge and understand ourselves as living in a larger animate universe, and failure too—crucially—to draw out, to co-participate with, that very universe. Instead, we drive it into silence, and then take that silence to confirm our own centrality, as if we really were the only ones with anything to say.

In contrast, Sharp portrays a people for whom symbols, ideas, and language constitute an ethical world in which revelatory interaction with the nonhuman world is made possible, a ceremonial world in which the nonhuman world *responds* and is *known*, a world in which this etiquette and knowledge constitute an ongoing and fluid relationship. *Etiquette is a condition of knowing the world itself.*

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<sup>42</sup> Sharp, *Transformation of Bigfoot*, pp. 144–65.