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Engaging with Indigenous Philosophy with an Indigenous Philosopher

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Abstract: This paper tells the story of an encounter between Wisakaychak, a trickster in the Omushkego tradition, and the Strange Stranger. The latter is engrossed in trying to determine what he can know beyond any doubt. Wisakaychak engages his partner in dialogue. By posing suitable questions to him, Wisakaychak is able to elicit answers from him, including the answer to the riddle of his own identity.

Keywords: doubt, epistemology, Indigenous philosophy, mind, thinking, Wisakaychak

Introduction

How does one engage with Indigenous philosophy with an Indigenous philosopher who continually writes outside the norm? I would answer by doing Indigenous philosophy oneself. I am not talking about analytic investigation or any other method commonly employed by trained philosophers. I am talking about an epistemology that is Indigenous in its relational interdependence with experience: sensuous, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Nor am I talking about phenomenology as understood in the Western world. What I am talking about requires an invitation to come into my world, a world that is simultaneously sensuous, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. As such, I decided to invite you, a western philosopher, to engage in Indigenous philosophy with me. Shall we journey together?

The Strange Stranger

Wisakaychak had been walking for days and days and was very hungry when he stumbled upon a cabin in the wood. Thinking there may be food inside, Wisakaychak peeked into the window and saw what looked to be a human sitting beside a wood burning stove doing nothing but staring into what Wisakaychak thought must be a fire, and where there is fire, there is usually food. Being hopeful but cautious and curious, because Wisakaychak is normally quite curious, Wisakaychak entered quietly so as not to disturb this creature, ready to run should it prove dangerous. In a mere whisper which, surprising Wisakaychak, actually sounded loud in the silent room with only the fire crackling, Wisakaychak asked, “What are you doing?”

Startled the man fell off his stool then, turning to Wisakaychak, he answered sounding quite irritated, “I’m thinking.”

Sensing no danger, and being a curious being, Wisakaychak strutted inside without waiting to be invited, then asked: “What are you thinking?” Without waiting for an answer Wisakaychak quickly added, “I do not smell anything cooking, so why are staring into that fire so intensely?”

Returning his stool upright the man turned to the stove and snapped, “I am not cooking. I am trying to learn what I can know.”

“You mean you don’t know what you know!”, said a confused Wisakaychak.

“No,” said the man, “of course I know what I know, but how can I truly know what I know is indeed what I know?”

“Well, if you don’t know what you know, then I do not think sitting here alone in front of a fire will help. Maybe you should go searching for what you don’t know.”

“That is precisely what I am trying to do. I need to know what I can know without any doubt at all; that way, I will know what I truly know. That is why I’m in this cabin *ALONE* so I have no distractions and you, whoever you are, are a distraction!”, he shouted.

“Why, I am Wisakaychak! And it is your lucky day, my friend, because I am the smartest being around,” Wisakaychak boasted. “I can help you find what you need to forget.”

The Stranger, beginning to turn red in the face with anger, shouted again, “I didn’t say I lost something. I said I needed to erase everything I know so I can know without a doubt.”

“Why do you need doubt? Are you waiting for the fire to give you the doubt you’re looking for? Is that why you were staring into it?”

Stranger: “Of course not. I’m not looking for doubt you fool. I am using doubt to find out what I can truly know.”

Truly puzzled by now and even more curious, Wisakaychak asked calmly: “Do you know who your mother is?”

The stranger replied in a testy voice: “Of course, I know who my mother is, do you take me for a fool? Anyway, that isn’t what I’m trying to doubt? I need to know what is real and what can be doubted.”

“The way I see it,” claimed Wisakaychak, “is you can’t doubt her, can you? So, you do know something, in which case she must be real. And what about your father, you have one, don’t you?”

Wisakaychak: “Then see, you can’t doubt her, can you, so you do know something, in which case she must be real? And what about your father, you have one don’t you?”

Still irritated the man replied, “Had”

“‘Had’, does that mean he died?”

In a softer but still irritated voice the Stranger softly replied, “Yes.”

“Indeed, I am sorry for your loss but doesn’t that mean death cannot be doubted?”

Snapping back the Stranger yelled, “Enough of this nonsense. You are interrupting my thinking.”

“Well darn,” said Wisakaychak, “seems to me I’m doing you a favor, since clearly your thinking is confused.”

Irritated the Stranger snaps, "It is not my mind that is confused. It's your useless questions."

"How can they be useless," laughed Wisakaychak, "if they're helping you find what you can doubt? Can you doubt that I am a nuisance?"

The stranger quickly replies, "Definitely not!"

"Can you doubt we are talking?"

"No, you annoying creature, but if you'd leave, I could think without interruption!"

Wisakaychak: "Hummmm! Well, that's a good start. Your mind knows I am a distraction so, clearly, I am here. You know we are talking so, clearly, we are doing something other than thinking. And you know I'm annoying, so clearly you have feelings. You know you have a mother and a father, so you didn't appear out of nothing. There, I've solved your thinking doubt. Can we eat?"

"No, I'm not finished. Can't you see I'm busy?"

"But how can you be busy? You're not doing anything, just sitting staring at a fire."

"I don't need to be doing anything to be thinking."

Suddenly a huge fluffy armchair appeared along with a pair of spectacles and Wisakaychak, swaggering to the chair, dons the spectacles. With a notebook and pencil in hand, Wisakaychak settles back into the chair for what appears to be a long visit.

Stranger: "What do you *think* you are doing? I want you to leave, not to get comfortable!"

Wisakaychak: "I decided to stay awhile as I am most curious. I'm not sure what kind of creature you are."

The stranger huffs angrily: "I'm not a creature. I'm a man. I am a thinking man. I exist because I am a thinking man. That's it, that's it!" the man shouted excitedly. I think, therefore I am. I cannot doubt that I think, therefore I exist!"

"Well, that's just plain dumb," replied Wisakaychak. "Haven't you already told me you have a mother and once had a father? I do believe, sir, that they brought you into existence because I know I did not and I've brought many things into existence. Besides, if you were just a thinking being, I'm wondering how you get things done? Do you have magic?"

"No, I don't have magic," said the Stranger. "I can get things done; it's just right now I am thinking, because I am a thinking man and I need answers that only my mind can give me. You see, I am able to doubt everything else except I cannot doubt that I am thinking."

"But how can you doubt your mother and father?" Irritated, Wisakaychak stands and walks over to the stove.

Stranger: "Now what do you think you are doing?"

Wisakaychak: “I’m not *thinking*. That, my friend, is your job, I am just doing. See, you *think*, I *do*.”

Suddenly Wisakaychak begins to laugh but only Wisakaychak laughs at the joke. Laughing hysterically, rolling on the floor, he finally sputters: “I told you I’m the smartest being. While you *think* I will *do*. Seems to me, if we are thinking and doing, we are going to get answers to your experiment. But, in the meantime, I will add another log to the fire because it’s getting chilly in here. Then I will cook us a huge feast because my belly is talking to me. Unless you don’t have food cause you’re a thinking creature.”

The Stranger snaps, “Of course I have food.”

Wisakaychak: “Well now, that is sad to hear, I was hoping you would *think* us into a feast. I would like to learn such a skill because too often my belly tells me its hungry when there is no food around. Anyway, it’s a good thing I am here, or you’d freeze to death thinking when your fire says goodnight.”

The stranger replied: “Don’t be ridiculous. I have wood. I can build up the fire if I need too and I definitely know how to stoke it myself to keep it going.”

“Oh ho, so you can do more than think,” answered Wisackaychak. “I was beginning to worry about what kind of creature you are that can do nothing all day but think. Are all creatures like you, like you they only think and let others do things for them?”

Angrily the stranger shouts: “WE are not creatures! We are human beings with rational minds! That’s why we can think about what is real and you clearly do not have a rational mind. You think fires say goodnight and bellies talk. There is nothing rational in that thinking.”

Wisakaychak: Well Mr. High-N-Mighty, what do you *think* that fire slowly going out is trying to tell you while you sit there all rational and cold? And what part of that fancy mind growls to tell you it’s hungry? Not only that,” Wisakaychak shouts back, “but how can you doubt the wood that heats you while you leisurely sit here thinking? And where do you *think* that wood comes from anyway, surely not your thinking thoughts! I’ll tell you, since your mind can’t seem to figure it out. It comes from a tree that was once alive, living its own life of leisure.”

The man starts to answer but Wisakaychak is on a roll and will not let him interrupt. “You know what I think? I think you forgot what a human is!”, shouted Wisakaychak. “That’s why you are sitting here staring at a fire. You think you can find answers but you aren’t even listening to what the fire or your belly are telling you.”

With a shake of her/his head, s/he calmed down and tried explaining in a reasonable voice: “You cannot find answers by listening only to yourself. Perhaps it would be better if you tried to figure out where you forgot your relationships. I bet they could help.”

With that, Wisakaychak strutted to the door, muttering, but loudly enough for the stranger to hear: “I’ll leave you now with only your mind for company, hahaha, you are the strangest creature I

have yet come across. This thinking business had worn me out, so I'll go find someone who knows, without any doubt, something about relationships and maybe that person will even offer me a bed. Oh wait, I see you have a bed! Does that mean you intend to sleep?"

"Of course, I sleep when my body gets tired."

Wisakaychak wisely nods, "See, even your body talks to you," but, with laughter, adds, "Oh dear, maybe it will think itself into bed!! Hahah. But I'll tell you something: you can think all you want to but when your belly starts talking or your ass starts clenching, you'd better listen."

Opening the door, an irritated Wisakaychak snaps: "And by the way, hasn't anyone ever told you it's polite to introduce yourself when two strangers meet? Oh, I forgot, how could anyone do that if only your mind exists?"

Slamming the door, he missed the stunned reply, "My name is René."