



*Ethics Wars on the Plains:
A Contrast between Native American and European American
Ethical Systems*

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In this paper I propose to contrast two very different ethical systems, the Native American or American Indian ethical system, especially of the tribes associated with the plains such as the Crow, the Ojibwe, and the Cheyenne and the ethical system of white, European-descendant American settlers of the Western Plains. I understand these two ethical systems to be incommensurate. Neither one can be evaluated in terms of the other. They are different and irreconcilable, but also each may provide an important and very valuable perspective to the other.

My goals in making this contrast are several. First, I want to argue for ethical incommensurability, for the idea that there are different ways of viewing our responsibilities toward each other and toward the world, and that no one way is the right way for everyone. Second, accusations of irrationality occur when one person, or group, does not understand the reasons why another person, or group, do what they do. Once one understands why the other does what she does, then it is no longer irrational. One may still disagree about the choice of action, but at least the action itself is understood. So, one of my goals is to foster understanding between different people by trying to articulate the reasons for why different people make different choices. Third, my own investigations into ethical theory have led me to conclude that the best approach to thinking about ethics is a “toolbox” approach.¹ Although specific ethical theories tend to be formulated in direct opposition to other ethical theories, so that Kant identifies Aristotelian ethics as not being about morality at all,² and, similarly, Mill’s utilitarianism identifies Kant’s ethics as useless,³ my own experience has been to find that sometimes, thinking about a problem in Kantian ethical terms is useful, and at other times, utilitarian considerations are more appropriate. The toolbox notion of ethics refers to the idea that

¹ I am working here with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s idea of the words of a language as tools in a toolbox. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1966), §11.

² In the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, for example, Kant says, “There have always been philosophers...attributing everything to more or less refined self-love. They have done so without questioning the correctness of the concept of morality.” Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* is a perfect example of such a philosophical view. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 23.

³ Mill says of Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals*, “...I cannot help referring, for illustration, to a systematic treatise by one of the most illustrious of them, the *Metaphysics of Ethics* by Kant. This remarkable man, whose system of thought will long remain one of the hallmarks in the history of philosophical speculation, does, in the treatise in question, lay down a universal first principle as the origin and ground of moral obligation....But when he begins to deduce from this precept any of the actual duties of morality, he fails, almost grotesquely....” In, John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 6.

the ideal is to have a fairly comprehensive understanding of various ethical theories, and that that comprehensive understanding is like a toolbox from which one can draw a specific tool - in this case, a set of ethical principles from a given ethical tradition - to apply to a specific case. And, just as it is good to have a variety of tools to deal with a variety of problems that might arise at the work site, so it is good to have a fairly wide variety of ethical tools for dealing with this increasingly complex, multicultural, and changing modern world. So, my third goal is to offer another conceptual tool for one's toolbox of ethical theories to empower people to make more complicated and sophisticated ethical choices.

Metaphysics and Ethics

One reason that the Native American and the Western ethical views are so different is that each emerges from a very different metaphysics. By "metaphysics", I mean a view of how the world works and the nature of our place in the world. Vine Deloria, Jr. provides an equation for the basis of the Native American metaphysics, and the equation is: "Power and place produce personality."⁴ Deloria explains what this equation means, "This equation simply means that the universe is alive, but it also contains within it the very important suggestion that the universe is personal and, therefore, must be approached in a personal manner."⁵

What does it mean to say that power and place produce personality, that the universe is alive, and that it is personal? These are very strange things to say to most Western ears. To act from such a perspective would be, from the dominant Western perspective, to act irrationally. A way to get access to this Native American metaphysics may be provided by the founder of the one really unique American philosophy of pragmatism, namely, Charles Sanders Peirce. In his essay "The Law of Mind", Peirce defines "personality," first, as "a co-ordination or connection of ideas."⁶ He elaborates on this by saying,

[T]he word co-ordination implies something more...it implies a teleological harmony in ideas, and in the case of personality this teleology is more than mere purposive pursuit of a predeterminate end; it is a developmental teleology. This is personal character. A general idea, living and conscious now, it is already determinative of acts in the future to an extent to which it is not now conscious.⁷

Peirce is notoriously difficult to understand, but he is saying here something remarkably similar to Deloria's equation that 'power + place = Personality.'

To illustrate what these two thinkers are talking about, consider a meadow. A meadow can be thought of as a place where there is a confluence of powers. The powers that are operative in a meadow include the types of grasses, flowers and other flora that grow there. They include the types of fauna that graze, sleep, live or visit there. They include the nature of the stream that flows through the meadow. They include the

⁴ Vine Deloria, Jr. and Daniel Wildcat, *Power and Place: Indian Education in America* (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Resources, 2001), 23.

⁵ *Power and Place*, 23.

⁶ Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Law of Mind in Chance, Love, and Logic: Philosophical Essays*, edited by Morris Cohen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 233.

⁷ "Law of Mind," 234.

surrounding forest that both encroaches upon the meadow and is held at bay by the ecosystem of the meadow. These “powers” correlate with, in the vocabulary of Peirce, “ideas.”

A particular meadow, then, which is a particular place with a very particular confluence of “powers” or a particular “co-ordination or connection of ideas”, will have a particular “personality.” This is something we, as human beings, can know about a particular meadow. We can know its “personality.” What does it mean to know a meadow’s “personality”? It means we know what grows there. We know what animals come to visit there. We know when the stream runs full and when it is nearly dry. We know what trees are trying to grow on the margins of the meadow. These powers could also be described in terms of dispositions or habits of the meadow. To know the personality of a meadow is not that different from knowing the personality of a person. When you know a thing’s personality, what you know is its dispositions and its habits; you know what to expect in the future from it.

If we live near or in the meadow, this knowledge will be invaluable. It will take a considerable amount of time to acquire this knowledge of the meadow. It will take some time to learn its “personality.” If we do learn its “personality”, then we can work with the meadow to meet our own needs while at the same time fostering the health of this meadow upon which we depend. ‘Working with’ the meadow would mean planting plants that will grow well in the meadow, but not disturb its essential ecosystem. It will mean taking game from the meadow, but, once again, in a way that will not disturb or destroy the essential balance of the meadow system, so that game will continue to come to the meadow.

Any natural system, from an amoeba (Peirce uses the example of a slime mold) to a meadow to the whole world, will, according to this definition, have a personality. A “system” implies some sort of organization. Something that is organized “implies...,” in Peirce’s words, “...a teleological harmony in ideas.” This means that there is some kind of unity to the various parts, a “harmony,” and furthermore, that this unity or harmony has some kind of direction (a “teleology,” a goal or end or purpose), has some sort of purpose or purposiveness, which is to say there are provisions there for further developments.

This is a metaphysical perspective on the world. It is a perspective that sees all natural systems as “alive.” To be alive is just to have a personality, and anything that occupies space and displays some kind of organization and power, i.e., it displays signs of change, has personality. A tree, under this description, will have a personality. Western metaphysics does not, generally speaking, think in terms of “personalities”. Kant makes a distinction that is very characteristic of Western thinking. Kant distinguishes between that which has a dignity, which includes, for Kant, all people, and that which has a price, which includes everything else.⁸ Things which have a dignity (human beings) are infungible (irreplaceable). Things which have a price are fungible, which is another way of saying that you can do what you like with them. We have, according to Kant, an absolute moral duty to things that have a dignity, that is, toward people. We have no moral responsibility whatsoever toward things that have a price.

⁸ *Metaphysics of Morals*, 53.

Native versus Western Ethics

Native American ethics derive from their metaphysics. The fundamental ethical principle that derives from the metaphysical perspective that power and place produce personality is that: “The personal nature of the universe demands that each and every entity in it seek and sustain personal relationships...all relationships have a moral content.”⁹ This, I want to propose, is a way more strenuous ethics than anything put forth in Western philosophy. The most severe ethical system in Western philosophy is probably Kant’s, based on the Categorical Imperative. The Categorical Imperative says, “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”¹⁰ This is a severe ethical system precisely because it is categorical. It does not admit of exceptions. It does not admit of compromises. It is unclear to what degree contexts are supposed to figure into our moral evaluations when using the categorical imperative, but it is clear that we should limit the significance of context as much as possible.

From the Native perspective, on the other hand, context *determines* the ethical choice we make. There is no universal principle beyond ‘seeking and sustaining’ relationships. Things done that will harm the other will harm the relationship, and so are to be avoided. Since virtually everything in the world has a personality, our relational ties are extremely complex and our responsibilities many. The Kantian moral system requires that we treat other rational creatures (human beings, for Kant) with “respect.” That is barely a relationship at all. It is not necessarily easy always to treat others with respect, but it imposes nowhere near the demands of the imperative to *sustain* relationships.

Another way that Deloria describes the imperative of Native American ethics is by saying, “relationships must not be left incomplete.”¹¹ This description picks up Peirce’s idea of a “developmental teleology.” A relationship, like a personality, will have the character of directionality, certain tendencies that will be like provisions in the present for future ways of going. The ethical imperative of having a relationship means honoring, nurturing, taking care of the relationship, which means helping it to go where it can and to develop in the way that will be most sustaining for all parties.

My own sense is that the Western version of ethics works extremely well with Capitalism, and is, in a sense, the opposite of the Native American ethical system. By that, I mean that seeing everything in the world as having a “price” (and I think that Kant does accurately describe a basic feature of Western metaphysics, how Westerners generally view objects in the world, even animals, like cows that are described as “product”) works extremely well to sustain and support a capitalist economy, and it is extremely problematic for sustaining and supporting “relationships.” I see this perspective of viewing non-human objects as having a price as not only an impediment to relationships with “things” or with places, in general, but that it also inflects our relationships with other people. In a world where the capitalist perspective dominates and making money is a universal imperative, it is hard to separate the respect we owe people from the potential money we can make from them.

⁹ *Power and Place*, 23.

¹⁰ *Metaphysics of Morals*, 39.

¹¹ *Power and Place*, 23.

This is not really a critique of Kant's ethical system so much as an observation about the difficulty of discerning the lineaments of moral responsibility in a capitalist system, nor is this simply a critique of capitalism. Capitalism is a very powerful economic, political, and metaphysical perspective to take on the world. It has produced technologies and improvements in health and living conditions that are inconceivable apart from it. There seems to be some kind of link between capitalism and democracy, although this link is being challenged by countries like China, which are becoming more and more capitalistic, yet remaining steadfastly non-democratic. There is much to be said for capitalism, as there is for the dominant Western ethical philosophies of Kantianism and utilitarianism. The question I want to consider is whether Kantianism and utilitarianism, which I am considering together as representative of Western ethics (even though there are many differences between them), can be considered as commensurate with the Native American view of ethics, or whether the two, broadly speaking, outlooks are incommensurable.

Incommensurability

If the two ethical systems are commensurable, each should be understandable in terms of the other, and either should be applicable to any particular ethically demanding situation, and the ethical conclusions should, ultimately, be similar. If none of these apply, then the two systems are incommensurable. I will argue that none of these apply. The Native American ethical perspective puts us into ethical relationships that neither Kantianism nor utilitarianism will recognize as ethical relationships. Kantianism demands "respect" for other people and utilitarianism demands maximizing utility for the greatest number of people, neither of which necessarily pertain to sustaining or completing relationships, so their ethical prescriptions will be quite different from the ethical prescriptions that Native American ethics will generate.

Illustrations of Incommensurability

In order to support my argument for the incommensurability of the Native American ethical outlook and the Western ethical outlook, I am going to look at three examples, two from narrative fictions, Arthur Penn's film, *Little Big Man*, and Winona LaDuke's novel, *Last Standing Woman*, and one from a recent book of philosophy by Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. These examples are not meant to be proof of anything. They are meant to be illustrations of how incommensurability between ethical systems may look or play out in the world. I have picked examples from artworks precisely for the liveliness of their depictions and for their ability to activate our moral imaginations in ways that straightforward historical accounts may not be as able to do. Finally, I will not be examining these works in their entirety, but only focusing on very specific episodes in which incommensurability is most salient.

Illustration of Incommensurability: *Little Big Man*

Arthur Penn's film *Little Big Man* (1970) is the story of the life of one Jack Crabb (Dustin Hoffman). The movie begins when Jack Crabb is one hundred and twenty one years old. He is telling the story of his life to a historian (William Hickey) who is doing some research on the Indian wars, but who is also looking for a very specific, and

stereotyped, account of those times. Crabb will tell him a much more complicated story of those times than the historian was expecting. What makes Jack Crabb's life so special is that he was born to a 'white' family, but his parents were killed by some marauding Indians, who happened to be Pawnee, and then, he and his sister were rescued by an Indian from another tribe, the Cheyenne. His sister escapes, but Crabb stays and becomes the adopted grandson of the tribe's chief, Old Lodge Skins (Chief Dan George). He is given a tribal name by his grandfather based on the courage he displays in battle: Little Big Man. In the course of his life, because of various circumstances that come up, Jack Crabb alternates between living with the Indian tribe and returning to live in 'white' society. He is forced, therefore, to incorporate into his thinking, but also to live alternately, what I am arguing are two incommensurate ethical systems. When he lives with the Cheyenne, he lives according to the worldview that, as his grandfather explains to him, "everything is alive," and the ethical imperative of sustaining and completing relationships. This is how his grandfather explains the difference between the Cheyenne (the "Human Beings") and the white man to him:

Because the Human Beings, my son, they believe everything is alive. Not only man and animals, but also water, earth, stone. And also the things from them, like that hair. The man from whom this hair came, he's bald on the other side, because I now own his scalp. That is the way things are. But the white men, they believe everything is dead: stone, earth, animals, and people, even their own people. If things keep trying to live, white men will rub them out. That is the difference.¹²

When Little Big Man lives in 'white' society, he lives according to the worldview that utility must be maximized, money is important, and white people deserve respect and Indians do not. As a result of participating in both worldviews and ethical systems, he does not fully fit into either.

The particular scene in the movie that I would like to focus on involves the events that ensue when Old Lodge Skins decides that the U.S. army has done too many awful things to the Cheyenne, hence the Cheyenne need to go to war with them to "teach them a lesson." When the Cheyenne go to war, their ethical imperative prescribes "counting coup." A "coup stick" is a short stick with which one humiliates one's enemy by touching him in battle. The scene in the movie is shown in a very long shot. The Cheyenne warriors are on their ponies, trying to get close enough to the U.S. cavalry men to "count coup," that is, touch them with their coup sticks. The cavalrymen, on the other hand, are using repeating rifles and pistols to shoot and kill the Cheyenne warriors.

In the movie, this is, no doubt, romanticized, but it does reenact a clear difference in the understanding of war, of enemy, of what constitutes bravery, and the differences are incommensurate. There is no understanding on either side of what the other is doing. The cavalry men keep shooting the Cheyenne until the Cheyenne are sufficiently wiped out to the point that they need to retreat. The Cheyenne warriors continue to count coup until the moment of retreat, not seeming to get what the U.S. cavalrymen were doing. From the perspective of the Cheyenne, the cavalrymen were cowards. From the

¹² From the script for *Little Big Man* at: http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/l/little-big-man-script-transcript.html

perspective of the cavalrymen, the Cheyenne were crazy Indians behaving irrationally given the nature of battle.

A way to describe the difference in ethical terms would be to say that for the Cheyenne warriors, one had to establish a relationship with one's enemy - touching them - before you could fight or kill him, while for the U.S. cavalry men, there was no such requirement. The U.S. soldiers were operating from a 'maximum efficiency' model - kill as many Indians as you can while maximizing your own safety. The Cheyenne warriors were operating from an 'honor-in-battle' model. These are incommensurate models. It would be as crazy and irrational for the U.S. soldiers to start counting coup as it would be for the Cheyenne, in this context and at this time, to start just shooting the soldiers without first having touched them with their coup stick.

Illustration of Incommensurability: *Last Standing Woman*

Winona LaDuke's novel *Last Standing Woman* (1997) takes place largely on the White Earth Reservation in northwestern Minnesota. It is a very complicated novel spanning many decades (from the 1860's to the present) and many characters (fifty are named in a "List of Characters"). It is about, like Penn's *Little Big Man*, the liminal territory between the world of the Native Americans and that of the 'white' people. Unlike Arthur Penn, Winona LaDuke is a Native American herself, a member of the Anishinaabekwe (Ojibwe) tribe. The novel includes explicit references to the Fargo/Moorhead area, including references to specific family names that are still recognizable in businesses in the area today. Her novel is a work of art, to be sure, but it is also a protest, a political protest, against injustices that she perceives have been perpetrated by 'white' people against the Native peoples. In a chapter entitled, "Wiindigoo," a man named Namaybin reflects on the lumbermen who are cutting down the large white pines on his reservation due to changes in federal and state laws that permitted such harvesting. A line in the chapter reflects the Native American attitude toward Nature and objects in Nature described by Deloria. LaDuke writes, "the large white pines...were grandfathers to the Anishinaabeg."¹³ Because of this, Namaybin thinks of the white lumbermen as "wiindigoo," which are a type of mythical monster; a *wiindigoo* is a person who has turned into a supernatural cannibal. LaDuke tells a little story in the chapter about a *wiindigoo*:

The *wiindigoo*'s small lodge had stood on the north side of Round Lake, a lake rich with beaver, fish, and wild rice. But the foods did not please the old man now. The *wiindigoo* had starved once, long before, starved during a cold winter of too much snow and not enough rabbits. Starved nearly to death. Until he found a family, also weak from the winter. He culled those animals, culled them right from the herd. He culled them out of hunger and out of anger too. His own wife and family were long gone from the small pox. His bitterness at those who brought it had not subsided. He was alone, his family gone. His face and hair were unkempt, his moccasins hard with use. He ate his visitors now. Never again to be a victim of invisible death. He ate those who strayed, were weak, or were just plain unfortunate. He ate the bold and the foolish, and he ate the young. He relished in his evil, and he forged a magic, a strong magic with the *Mishinamaginebig*, the

¹³ Winona LaDuke, *Last Standing Woman* (Stillwater, MN: Voyageur Press, 1997), 67.

Great Horned Sturgeon, saying “*Ninitim, ginitim. Ninitim, ginitim.* My turn, your turn.”¹⁴

Namaybin looked again at the lumbermen. “The cannibal is here again,” Namaybin observed.¹⁵

There are some interesting things to say about this story of the *wiindigoo*. First of all, as awful and monstrous as the *wiindigoo* is, there is an explanation, really, an ethical explanation, for why he is so bad. He was once a normal man, a husband and a father. He has been transformed by suffering, suffering imposed not just by wild Nature, but even more painfully by the coming of the ‘white’ people and the diseases they brought. So, while he is identified by the ethical term “evil,” his evil is also explained in a way that makes it something that could happen to anyone, if enough suffering was imposed upon them. His evil is really a result of something like “moral luck.” It does not make him less evil, nor suggest that there is any hope of remediation for him, but it does remove the judgment of ethical blame in regarding him. The lesson of the story is, therefore, two-fold (at least): first, be extremely careful to avoid the *wiindigoo*; second, be extremely careful not to become a *wiindigoo*, because it could happen to anyone.

Another interesting thing to say about this story of the *wiindigoo*, and especially Namaybin’s apparent reflection on it when he sees the lumbermen cutting down the large white pines that he, Namaybin, regards as his grandfathers, is how Namaybin sees the ‘white’ lumbermen. He sees them as *wiindigoo*. On the one hand, this is a terrible ethical judgment of them, that they are vicious cannibals killing off his, and, in some sense, their own, ancestors. In another sense, however, this would seem to carry over the same understanding, the same lack of ethical blame. That is, it suggests that he thinks that they must have suffered some terrible hardship, some equivalent of nearly starving to death, to have their moral compasses so turned around that they kill those they should honor and protect.

The incommensurability emerges in the encounter between Namaybin and one of the lumbermen. Namaybin speaks to the lumbermen in Ojibwe, expressing his disapproval and disappointment. One of the lumbermen responds:

The lumberman spoke now. “Mr. Minnogeeshig,” he said abruptly in his harsh, awkward white man’s language, irked by the silliness of the Indian’s veiled words and secrets. “I have papers that say I can take the trees off your land. I have the papers.”

The interpreter translated for Namaybin. “White man says he can take the trees. White man wants the trees. White man has paper.”

Namaybin looked at the two men and held his hand out, beckoning the paper toward him. The white man passed the paper to the old Indian.

The Indian looked at the papers, puzzling over the strange writing of the white men, unable to read, yet understanding clearly what the lumbermen wanted.

The lumberman shrugged, “I am only coming here out of courtesy, Mr. Minnogeeshig,” he said. “The Indian agent gave permission to cut the timber off your land.”¹⁶

¹⁴ *Last Standing Woman*, 68.

¹⁵ *Last Standing Woman*, 68.

¹⁶ *Last Standing Woman*, 69.

A moment later the lumberman says to Namaybin, “Your trees are mine. And your trees are coming down.”¹⁷ This last line nicely captures full incommensurability of the two worlds and value systems. For Namaybin, the trees are not his, any more than his parents or grandparents are “his” in the sense that he *owns* them. For the lumberman, they are Namaybin’s trees precisely in the sense that Namaybin owns them, but, in terms of ownership, the lumberman has a piece of paper that supersedes Namaybin’s rights of ownership according to a higher principle of law. Namaybin sees the lumberman as a monstrous *wiindigoo*, while the lumberman sees what he is doing as an act of courtesy towards Namaybin, treating Namaybin with the respect owed an owner of something over which one has been given a special legal dispensation. With respect to the trees, the lumberman is simply carrying out an act of clear utility. There is no evil intent on his part. The trees are valuable and useful, and their value and use are wasted as long as they are just standing there in the forest.

This idea is nicely captured later in the novel. The land salesman Lucky Waller was selling parcels of reservation land that were deemed unowned because of a new law that stipulated that only Indians of mixed race could claim ownership to reservation land. There were many parcels of land that no Indian of mixed race claimed, and which no Indian of unmixed race could claim ownership. In trying to convince the grandfather of Norman Grist to buy some of the unclaimed parcels of land, Waller explained to him, “The Indians did not use them, so there was no reason the white man could not.”¹⁸ Again, there is an incommensurability in worldview at work. “Using” the land meant, for Waller and for the German, Norwegian, and Czech immigrants who were moving to the area, farming the land. The Native peoples were in a relationship with the land, which certainly included deriving their sustenance from it, but precluded certain kinds of uses, like radically deforesting it or removing all of its stones or transforming its contours.

Illustration of Incommensurability: *Radical Hope*

A final example that I would like to consider is from Jonathan Lear’s very powerful book, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (2006). Lear analyzes what happens to the Crow people after the buffalo are wiped out from the Great Plains states at the end of the 19th century. Lear focuses on something that the last great Crow chief, Plenty Coup, said to the white man, Frank B. Linderman, who was his friend and to whom Plenty Coup told his story so that Linderman could write it in a book. The words appear in an author’s note to account for why the story of Plenty Coup’s life seems to end abruptly, long before Plenty Coup’s actual death. Plenty Coup tells him, “But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened.”¹⁹ Lear is struck by the phrase, “after this nothing happened,” and considers what this might mean.

Lear says, “The Crow were a nomadic, hunting, warrior tribe... Their ancestors, the Hidatsa, had lived along the Mississippi River at the beginning of the sixteenth

¹⁷ *Last Standing Woman*, 69.

¹⁸ *Last Standing Woman*, 127.

¹⁹ Quoted in Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.

century, and had migrated during that century to North Dakota."²⁰ Later, they moved on to Montana. Crow culture was nomadic and oriented around warfare. Everything they did, and all members of the tribe participated in the ongoing preparations, celebrations, lamentations associated with war activities.²¹ The coup stick was central to their whole way of life. The coup stick had two primary roles. One was to mark the (temporary) boundary of the tribe. A coup stick would be planted in the ground, and where it was planted became an impassable barrier to any non-Crow, which every Crow warrior would defend to the death.²² The other role for the coup stick was that a warrior would have to strike an enemy with his coup stick before any other harm could be done to him.²³ Lear describes this activity of counting coup in terms of a "symbolic excess."²⁴ Before harming an enemy, you must touch him without harming him. This is not about utility; this is about identity. It is about Crow courage, Crow honor, and what it means to be a Crow warrior.

What does it mean for something to "happen"? If one lives in a culture in which there are no jobs, can one go to work? If one lives in a culture in which there is no money, can you buy something? If one lives in a culture in which there is no marriage, can one wed? The point of these questions is to highlight how culturally dependent most of what we think of ourselves as doing, most of what "happens," is. There is a possibility that Lear wants to identify to which he believes all people are vulnerable. As Lear says, "Humans are by nature cultural animals: we necessarily inhabit a way of life that is expressed in a culture. But our way of life - whatever it is - is vulnerable in various ways. And we, as participants in that way of life, thereby inherit a vulnerability. Should that way of life break down, that is our problem. The suggestion I want to explore... is that if our way of life collapsed, things would cease to happen."²⁵

Things ceased to happen for the Crow when the buffalo disappeared and the tribe was forced to move onto a reservation. When that happened, they were no longer able to move around nomadically following the buffalo. The coup stick meant nothing. As a consequence, it no longer meant anything to be a Crow. You could put a stick in the ground, but nothing would happen. It is like walking up to someone and saying, "I marry you." You can do it, but it does not mean anything. Nothing happens. No marriage occurs. Young Crow men tried to do something. There is one story of a group of young Crow men who steal some horses from a neighboring Blackfoot tribe, a noble and honorable Crow achievement when things could happen. But, on the reservation, this was simply illegal. They were caught and punished. There was no glory, no meaning, and no honor to be had. There was only humiliation.²⁶

There are several things to say about the story that Lear tells about the Crow, and about Plenty Coup's description of the time when things ceased to happen. First of all, it highlights not just ethical incommensurability, but cultural incommensurability as well. The coup stick and all it means has its meaning only in a very culturally specific context. Other Indian tribes understood what the coup stick of the Crow meant, when planted in

²⁰ *Radical Hope*, 10.

²¹ *Radical Hope*, 12.

²² *Radical Hope*, 13.

²³ *Radical Hope*, 15.

²⁴ *Radical Hope*, 16.

²⁵ *Radical Hope*, 6.

²⁶ *Radical Hope*, 27-8.

the ground, but it means absolutely nothing if that ground is on a reservation, or someone's property, which all of the ground becomes after the white men come and control the area.

Lear does the philosophically interesting move of compelling us to imagine ourselves into the place of the Crow. He is not just describing the strange predicament in which the Crow people found themselves when the buffalo were gone and they were forced to live on a reservation. He is claiming this to be a universal human vulnerability, one to which we are all susceptible. It is a vulnerability most of us do not recognize because of the narrowness of our vision, the limitations of our moral imaginations, and our unfamiliarity with history. However, once he has made this vulnerability explicit and clear, it is impossible to deny its reality, even as it is difficult to imagine it as a real possibility for oneself. This, however, is the fate of any conquered or colonized people. It will also be the fate of any people who find their way of living unsustainable politically, economically, or environmentally.

What will be needed, according to Lear, is some kind of creative re-telling of one's own story. What will be needed is a new narrative that will provide a new cultural context in which things can happen. This will best be accomplished, Lear thinks, if some elements of one's original narrative and earlier story can be preserved. Plenty Coup begins this process based on a dream he has, when he is a young boy, not yet ten, of a chickadee. In his dream, he sees, "In that tree is the lodge of the Chickadee. He is least in strength but strongest of mind among his kind. He is willing to work for wisdom. The Chickadee is a good listener. Nothing escapes his ears, which he has sharpened by constant use."²⁷ The elders of his tribe interpret this dream of the young Plenty Coup as outlining a strategy to deal with the encroachment on their lands by the white man. They interpret it as a warning, and the warning is to listen to and not fight the white man. If they do that, listen rather than fight, they will survive as a tribe.²⁸ Lear sees this lesson as being deeply incorporated into Plenty Coup's thinking, and in his way of re-thinking Crow courage into a form that meant fighting beside the white man in World War I. Lear concludes,

Plenty Coups was able to draw upon the traditional icon of the chickadee. Through his dream-vision, Plenty Coups was able to take a valued and honored spiritual force and put it to creative use in facing up to new challenges. Thus, although Plenty Coups was advocating a new way of life for the Crow, he was drawing upon the past in vibrant ways. And thus I think a case can be made that Plenty Coups offered the Crow a *traditional* way of going forward.²⁹

When things cease to happen, that is not necessarily the end. Or, rather, it may be the end of something, but not the end of all possibilities, *tout court*. It can also be the beginning of something new. This new thing will have to be created, but it will be best created if some continuities with the past can be preserved. This is a kind of dream work or re-imagining of the past into the present and the future.

²⁷ Quoted in *Radical Hope*, 70.

²⁸ *Radical Hope*, 72.

²⁹ *Radical Hope*, 154.

Vine Deloria, Jr., in his preface to *Power and Place: Indian Education in America*, says,

The educational journey of modern Indian people is one of spanning two distinct value systems and worldviews. It is an adventure in which the Native American sacred view must inevitably encounter the material and pragmatic focus of the larger American society. In that meeting ground lies an opportunity for the two cultures to both teach and learn from each other.³⁰

What Deloria describes is a situation of two co-existing, incommensurate worldviews, but the concluding sentence speaks of something beyond that division. It speaks of the possibility of reciprocal teaching and learning that holds out the promise of a transcendence of the incommensurate dichotomy. Everyone, to some extent, represents a unique, and to some degree incommensurate, worldview with respect to everyone else's. And yet, we make friends, we marry, we find ways to build a worldview together with another human being. This is the beginning of building a culture. It is also the beginning of overcoming what has been incommensurable. It is a radical, but very real hope.

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³⁰ *Power and Place*, v.