

Ethics in Place and Time: Introducing Wub-e-ke-niew's *We Have the Right to Exist: A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought*

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I.

Much of our day is spent looking at and manipulating various plastic, glass, and metal contraptions that we did not and could not build. We spend most of our time in boxes and enclosed containers of varying sizes. Food appears on shelves in stores. We obtain it from strangers, among strangers. We interact with at most a few different large animals on a regular basis: other human beings, a pet or two, a bird singing on a particularly nice morning. We control the temperature around us with buttons and dials. We take thousands of steps a day, but on concrete, tile, stained wood, more concrete. We live on earth, but not really. We are not connected to land, to places, to other animals. We spend much of our time away from our families, further away still from our extended families. Most of us don't move our bodies very much, but we move all over our countries. We live in what we imagine to be a straight line, with our plans and goals and broken progress into and through the future; the past receding, fading, unremembered; and death—an always looming tragedy—ahead. We learn about what has happened before us from books and TV, if we learn about it at all. We don't think of ourselves as having a history. We are basically alone; perhaps we have found another person to connect to, to have children with. We live close to people, but we are not close to them. We stand out on the earth. We leave our mark. We do not live in harmony with the world around us. That world has been killed, contained, sanitized, paved over, subjugated, dominated to make things easier for us, convenient. This is the modern world.

Most of us have had little direct role in building this world. We were born into it. It is all we know. Without thinking about it, we do our small parts to keep it alive—although that is not the right word—day by day. Departures from it strike us as romantic, perhaps even attractive, but also difficult, unfathomable, and not something we could choose. We are deep into these lives. From within them, the world we are in has significant attractions and advantages. I like air-conditioning. I hate mosquitoes.

Some philosophers, like poets, take a perfectly ordinary part of our existence and make it seem strange, puzzling, even horrifying. The Ahnishinahbæó'jibway philosopher Wub-e-ke-niew (1928-1997), writing from a life that began in one world and moved into another, does this.

In his epic *We Have the Right to Exist: A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought*, he presents a distinct philosophical worldview and way of life, that of the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway, and contrasts it with what he calls the Lislakh perspective and way of being in the world. For most of us reading the book, we will recognize the Lislakh perspective as something like our own. Wub-e-ke-niew is like Alexis de Tocqueville, writing about America, but in reverse. He's not the visitor here; we are. He is someone who explicitly stands with those who have been here for thousands of years, but who has had to learn the ways of these newcomers, these trespassers. He looks at us with at least part of himself in a different world—able to see us better than we see ourselves.

Like de Tocqueville's classic work, the book is a bit hard to categorize. This is not incidental. As Wub-e-ke-niew puts it, [t]he Ahnishinahbæó'jibway religious and philosophical tradition, the *Midé*, is holistic—there is no compartmentalization between religion, economics, science, philosophy, and politics” (195). Indeed, he is explicitly critical of the disconnected, fragmented approach to thinking about the world that is embodied in academic and social institutions and disciplinary and professional boundaries. This fragmentation enables a person to go “to Church on Sunday morning, and then [to go]

back to destroying the environment again” or to be an “accredited scientist with a Ph.D.” but also engage in and justify policies of “irreversible environmental destruction” (94). The holism is evident in the book, as he provides a broadly comprehensive presentation the Ahnishinahbæó’jibway perspective on a variety of philosophical topics: identity, tradition, language, ethics, space and time, social and political life, and much else. And the book does many other things, too. It is also a partial autobiography; a carefully researched history of centuries of abuse and genocide of the indigenous people of North America at the hands of the United States government, in particular the history and genealogy of Red Lake Reservation and the people he refers to as Ahnishinahbæó’jibway;¹ and a personal and moving account of the way in which forced education and physical abuse by members of the dominant culture attempted to eliminate a whole way of living and thinking about the world. Wub-e-ke-niew is concerned to set the record straight, and he does this as a historian would—with detailed references to records (some even included in the book’s appendices), careful footnotes, and a decade of research behind his efforts.

Amidst this recording and documenting, philosophical ideas shine through on almost every page. I will concentrate on two central philosophical themes: (1) the contrast between Lislakh and Ahnishinahbæó’jibway conceptions of time and (2) the related differences between Lislakh and Ahnishinahbæó’jibway conceptions of ethical life.

It is a remarkable book: blunt, brutal, funny, delightful, meticulous, scholarly, elegant, and engaging. It is hard not to be affected by it. It is also remarkable that it exists at all.

II.

Wub-e-ke-niew was born in 1928 in his grandfather’s log house, “on the shores of Red Lake at Ba-kwa-kwan, where my people of the Bear *Dodem* had lived in birchbark longhouses for many thousands of years” (xxix). His early years were spent with his grandfather, father (his mother died of tuberculosis when he was three), brother, and other extended family living “in *Ahnishinahbæó’jibway* space and time” (xxx). The life he describes there, although not identical to those of his ancestors thousands of years prior, included many deep connections to that life. He references long dark nights of storytelling and elders smoking kinnikinic, the traditional Ahnishinahbæó’jibway language being spoken, traditional crops—squash, potatoes, onions, several kinds of beans—being grown and stored underground in traditional ways, fishing and hunting, and the basic retention of “our Aboriginal Indigenous self-sufficiency” (xxx-xxxi). And this despite the fact that this life was taking place in what he describes as a “P.O.W. camp”—a large, unmodernized reservation of land that the Ahnishinahbæó’jibway were not allowed to leave.

He was abruptly cast out of this life at the age of 7 by three tragedies: the death of his grandfather, his father being placed in a tuberculosis sanatorium, and his being forced into a Catholic boarding school by the U.S. government as part of a compulsory education mandate. As Wub-e-ke-niew describes it, “the U.S. government said that the boarding schools were meant to civilize us, but they intended to destroy us as a people—genocide” (xxxii). He spent nine years in this boarding school, a time of abuse and miseducation, until he eventually ran away, finding work in a number of itinerant jobs until eventually joining the U.S. Army at 18. After leaving the army, he worked as a trucker for almost a decade. During those trucking jobs, he taught himself to read in a serious way, basically teaching himself to read and write.

¹ This name is important to Wub-e-ke-niew, and he takes “Ojibwe” to be an objectionable, inaccurate alternative. He also refrains from using “Anishinaabe,” the standard autonym used by a group of culturally related indigenous peoples resident in what are now Canada and the United States, including the Odawa, Saukteaux, Ojibwe (including Mississaugas), Potawatomi, Oji-Cree, and Algonquin peoples. He argues at length that the “Euro-Americans invented artificial Indian tribes, and gave these tribes names” (3), and that accordingly many of these names and self-identifications are inaccurate and are the result of missionary and Western European influence and efforts to destroy the language and identity of aboriginal indigenous communities. Obviously, this is a controversial position.

He includes this introductory autobiographical material in the book reluctantly, stating explicitly that it was the product of a compromise with the publisher, rather than something he wanted to include. But it is helpful to understand how he could come to occupy the distinctive philosophical perspective that he does—both as an advocate, expositor, and translator of core *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* ideas, and as a fierce critic of the philosophical worldview of the people he refers to as Lislakh, but which we might refer to simply as white people or white Americans or, really, most Western Europeans and Americans in dominant social positions. “At this point in my life I have the advantage of being able to stand in the context of either culture, and see from both the European and the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* points of view” (xxx), he writes.

One of the core ideas that emerges from the book is that there is a distinctive perspective, a philosophical world view, of the dominant group in the United States—a group that he refers to with the neologism *Lislakh*. This is a word which he credits to the linguist Carleton Hodge, used to “refer to the inter-related and historically connected peoples who share societal, cultural, language and/or patrilineal roots within that usually referred to as an abstract entity, Western Civilization” (251). This is a broad category, certainly. The precise breadth isn't as important as the core: these are White people, people with “Western European” ancestry, Euro-Americans, White Americans in particular. Presenting the details of their worldview is a significant part of the book's project. A central part of the identity as Wub-e-ke-niew describes it is constituted by absence, ignorance, and self-alienation. He describes them as people who “have been severed from their roots and their own identity” and “who have no name for themselves” (251).

Names and their connection to identity are deeply important to Wub-e-ke-niew. Chapter One begins: “We, the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway*, are among the Aboriginal Indigenous peoples of this Continent” (1). Throughout the book, he refers to himself and the group of which he is a part as *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway*—rejecting (as many do) the terms “Indian,” “American Indian,” and “Native American” as Lislakh impositions intended to control, erase, and render ignorant Aboriginal Indigenous people. More strikingly, he is equally disdainful of group names like “Chippewa,” “Métis,” and “Ojibwe,” which he also sees as Lislakh creations, often the direct result of agreements with and regulations from the Federal Government of the United States and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. None of this is innocent, according to Wub-e-ke-niew:

Western European stereotypes and labels are used to create *identities* which prescribe behavior for those who accept these external definitions as a description of themselves, pre-empting their own knowledge of who they are... Labelling is done to maintain the hierarchical class system, so that the Western European elite can continue to live a life of luxury at the expense of everybody else. (97-98)

The politics of this is complicated and personal. Many people embrace the labels “Native American” and “American Indian” as describing their identity and many embrace “Ojibwe” and similar tribal designations more specifically. Wub-e-ke-niew's unsparing tone on this front might be off-putting or worse to some, and there is a politics of authenticity that is troubling, and might be very troubling, if that were Wub-e-ke-niew's central project. This seems an uncharitable interpretation of his main point, even if he does sometimes veer into a kind of purism (“[o]f the nearly eight thousand people presently defined by the United States Government as members of the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians, only about two hundred are *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* ... the rest are White and Métis people trapped by the Indian identity” (xxv)). His main point is that understanding and, in some cases, reclaiming and returning to, traditional Aboriginal Indigenous ways of living, thinking, speaking, and self-conceiving is of paramount importance. He is stridently and powerfully against adaption to the modern Lislakh world and perspective, against thinking of being Native American as just being another kind of minority group. As he puts it, “The *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* are completely outside of the Lislakh systems. We are not a minority, no matter how few our numbers, and we remain a Nation on our own land” (xliv).

The book is his attempt to offer the first presentation of the actual Ahnishinahbæó'jibway perspective, not something filtered through a Lislakh perspective, ideas of “Native Americans,” or new-age wisdom literature that might offer Lislakh people a respite from the Lislakh world they have constructed. The omnipresence and dominance of that perspective, however, means that he knows much of his audience will have that perspective in mind as they read his words. So, the project ends up having two core aims: (1) to articulate and make known the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway perspective; and (2) to make visible the often obscured moral and metaphysical commitments of the Lislakh, the Western, the Euro-American, the White people who do not know who they are, and whose perspective on the world has become the dominant one in many places. The rest of this chapter will detail and explore the contrasts that Wub-e-ke-niew draws between the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway and Lislakh perspectives with respect to two large topics: time and ethics.

III.

Wub-e-ke-niew describes his early years with his extended family living “in *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* space and *time*” (xxx). Several sections of the book expand on the differences between Ahnishinahbæó'jibway and Lislakh conceptions of time, and the connection between time and place. You may have noticed the “*time*” in the above quotation. Wub-e-ke-niew uses “*time*”—as distinct from “time”—to mark the difference between the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway concept from that of the Lislakh (roughly, Western European) concept of time. Throughout the book, Wub-e-ke-niew is focused more on the phenomenology of time, or the shared social conception of time, rather than the metaphysics of time, although it is an interesting question how these interrelate.

As Wub-e-ke-niew describes it, for the Lislakh, time is linear, precisely measured, characterized by a detached past, a definite if distant beginning (whether the Big Bang or some moment of creation), and an implied end. Individuals experience an “utter lack of hope” (87) at the thought of their inevitable death. They avoid thinking much about the future. In some fairly real sense, “time is money... [m]oney and time are a part of the same thing” (89)—an abstract thing that we measure carefully, tracking the orderly, linear, drip, dripping away of these units of value until they are gone and we are gone. Time does not accumulate in us or strengthen us; it ravages us and slips away. Rather than being more valuable with age, then, we live in a society in which “we have been “manipulated by corporate advertisers in the media to idolize youth,” so that we “become convinced that the young know more than their elders” (86). The past “vanishes into obscurity,” with history becoming “what they describe as the dead past, hypothetical and in a sense perennially unknowable, inaccessible in the abstract” (86). For the Lislakh, “time is fragmented, splintered into mechanically defined seconds and minutes and hours, boxed into externally imposed segmented days on a blank calendar, defined without dimension or texture” (87). Time for the Lislakh is not connected to place, it is something that we assume moves along completely independently of us or of the living world. Einsteinian ideas of spacetime, on which the three dimensions of space are fused with the one dimension of time into a single four-dimensional manifold, are now generally accepted as the correct scientific view, but remain deeply foreign to ordinary thinking about time.

This conception of time is, fundamentally, sad, precise, mechanical, indifferent, and terrifying. Wub-e-ke-niew suggests that walking around with it in our heads leads Lislakh people to act without thought for the future (and certainly not the distant future) and without regard to the past; to live “in the moment” stuffing ourselves full of distracting pleasures, or to tell and believe stories in which we have infinite amounts of time. Those of us who do not manage these things, or who briefly let our guard down, are left with a feeling that Philip Larkin aptly characterizes in his “Aubade”:

Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
Till then I see what's really always there:
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how

And where and when I shall myself die.

...

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,
A small unfocused blur, a standing chill
That slows each impulse down to indecision.
Most things may never happen: this one will,
And realisation of it rages out
In furnace-fear when we are caught without
People or drink. Courage is no good:
It means not scaring others. Being brave
Lets no one off the grave.
Death is no different whined at than withstood.²

If asked, many of us would describe this as the clear-eyed, unblinkered way to understand the world. That is just our situation. This is just what time is like. To Wub-e-ke-niew, this is “a morbid declaration of complete powerlessness and utter lack of hope, a pathological symptom of linear time” (87). That is not because there is some afterlife or heaven further down the line. It is because this is the wrong way to understand time.

Time, or, better, *time*, is not a line; it is a circle. It’s hard for those of us who are deeply within the Lislakh perspective to get away from our conception of time. Two things might help.

First, think of seasons. If one concentrates on the seasons that one would experience in a place like Red Lake—hot buggy summer, rich colorful autumn, bone cold winter, melting awakening spring—what one feels is not a line, marching toward death, but a circle. Going around the block, not leaving town. There is no sense of linear progress or advancement or forward motion; the idea of being somehow ahead of those who lived before for us or in a different place than them. And what we measure is not mechanical, detached from us and from life. To the contrary, we notice time moving because of what we feel, what we see, what we touch and smell. Our experience of time is an experience of life and of what even we call life cycles: growing, reproducing, giving birth to new life, dying, decomposing, becoming part of some new thing growing. Imagine how it would feel if we did not number the years, if we did not mechanically count seconds, minutes, and hours.

Second, think of nostalgia, in particular, the feeling one has returning to, say, one’s childhood neighborhood, or college town, or the first apartment you had after leaving home. Imagine walking around those places. Being in a place, in *this* place, one is returned—emotionally, mentally—to a time. There is a way in which experiences of a particular time are deeply intertwined with particular places. Now imagine—as is perhaps, but not likely to be, the case—that you have spent your whole life in the same basic places. Walking on the same paths, through the same woods, noticing the same particular trees. Wading and washing in the same river, running over the same rocks. Looking out at the same hills. And imagine that not only have you spent your whole life there, but so did your parents, and their parents, and their parents, back dozens or even hundreds of generations. This is where your parents met. This is where your uncle fell and broke his leg. This is the place you were told your grandmother saw and named a turtle. This is where your great-great-great-grandfather learned to fish as a boy. But all these markers happened in the same physical places—and they are the places that you see and spend time in, and learn in great detail about, and live in, and come to love. Time, then, or *time*, would not feel detached from place, would not seem to be some placeless abstract thing. It would not be like: OK, so, it was April 1997, so I was still in Los Angeles—where this requires a kind of complex mental calculation where one matches the measured time with one’s own physical location in the world. Time would be more

² Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2001).

intimately grounded, placed. We might even find it natural to talk about spacetime, or, perhaps better: timespace.

I am not sure that these suggestions provide a fully accurate way in to understanding the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway conception of *time*. Something like them is suggested by Wub-e-ke-niew, who writes that in Ahnishinahbæó'jibway *time*, “the circle always comes around, and the past is never gone,” that “*time* is perennial and unending, harmonized with the cycles of the seasons, flowing as an inseparable part of reality,” and that “*time* is intrinsically life and death, Grandmother Earth, Grandfather *Midé*” (87). Some of these phrases are familiar (“the circle always comes around”), but are also typically understood in some supernatural way having to do with reincarnation, ideas of karma or cosmic justice, and so on. That is clearly not the view. Wub-e-ke-niew suggests a picture that is naturalistic, but also unfamiliar:

Aboriginal Indigenous *time* has absolutely nothing to do with hours and minutes. We are on our own land, and our time is ancient and inseparable from our land. The meaning of the *Midé* title of my great-grandfather, Bah-se-nos, is in part in honor of *time*, the four seasons and the four directions. In European time, he has been dead for more than ninety years, and is therefore gone, forgotten. In *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway time*, Bah-se-nos is present and real, along with the phases of the moon, the intricate harmony of the *time* of the flowering and fruiting of each plant, the fledging of birds and the metamorphosis of insects, the *time* of making sugar, the *time* of dreams, the *time* of harvesting *mahnomen*. (90)

It is hard to imagine a perspective that is further from that of Larkin's. It is also hard, coming from something like Larkin's perspective, to feel confident that one has fully understood this alternative perspective, or that one has not simply reduced it to some other, more mystical or supernatural set of ideas. And Wub-e-ke-niew was concerned that these ideas might prove deeply elusive to those raised in a Lislakh world with a Lislakh worldview as I was (and as you probably were, too). I do find them elusive and puzzling, but also interesting and powerful, particularly when taken together: that the proper spatial metaphor for *time* is a circle, not a line; the connection of *time* to place; the connection of *time* to life and life processes, rather than to anything abstract or artificial; the rejection of the idea that that which has existed before is gone, dead, causally inert; the acceptance of the idea that our life has consequences far into the future; the interconnection of *time*, place, and life all as part of inseparable reality.

One question that we might consider, when comparing the Lislakh concept of time and the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway concept of *time*, is how we might decide which concept is the one that should be endorsed or embraced—which concept is *better*. One route to go is to ask which better captures reality—which is *true* (or something like that). And there are further questions to ask about how the phenomenology or social conception of time interacts with what we should believe about the metaphysics of time. I hope others take those questions up. Another kind of question, arguably related, is which concept is such that embracing it, having people adopt it, raising people with it, and so forth, produces better *results*.³ (Raising the important further question of how we should evaluate results.)

There is a powerful case for the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway concept of *time* on both counts. Wub-e-ke-niew clearly thinks that the Lislakh concept of time is bad both for people on an individual level and for the world on a global scale, not just because it leads them to personal despair like Larkin, but also because of how it leads them to act. What I want to consider next, then, are the implications of this view of *time* on how we should live, taking up, in particular, the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway ethical view described by Wub-e-ke-niew.

IV.

³ For useful general discussion of one way of framing these issues, see the introduction and papers in A. Burgess, H. Cappelen and D. Plunkett (Eds.), *Conceptual Ethics and Conceptual Engineering*, 2019, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

On a certain naturalistic, scientific picture of the world (informed by work on ecosystems and complex dynamical systems, for example) some Ahnishinahbæó'jibway ideas about *time*—the claims about interconnection and far-reaching consequences—should seem familiar and attractive (in theory, if not in our actual practices). A number of philosophers and scholars of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous environmental movements have demonstrated the importance and usefulness of Indigenous thought regarding what we might in English call “environmental stewardship” or “caretaking” or “sustainability” as well as Indigenous knowledge and science regarding the complex relationships that exist in the natural world.⁴ Many have pointed out that this seems to be something that the Lislakh (or the extensionally equivalent groups) have gotten badly wrong, as we now start to open our eyes onto the horror of environmental degradation and climate disaster that we have created over the past few hundred years.

Wub-e-ke-niew is highly critical of the Lislakh way of life, informed by widely shared Lislakh ethical views—both of which he takes to be an outgrowth of the Lislakh conception of time. He argues that it is because we see ourselves as coming from nowhere and always heading into non-existence that we are prone to not thinking about the future or about the consequences of what we are doing, except in the most short-term way imaginable. As he puts it,

The Western Europeans become detached from their continuity in *time* and thus seemingly insulated from their history, encapsulated in a present reality which has been severed at its roots.... I have spent a *time* studying the White man, and have heard him use the motto, “Eat, Drink, and Be Merry, for tomorrow we may die.”... From an *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* perspective, this is a very strange thing to say.... their assertion which has endured for a millennium that “The World Will End”.... enables brutal hierarchy to exist by warping *time*, and deludes their subject peoples into both a terrible hopelessness and sense of futility. (86-87)

The two basic failings, according to Wub-e-ke-niew, are (1) a failure to realize that we are fundamentally connected both synchronically and diachronically with everything, and (2) a failure to appreciate that we are not different than—not distinct or detached from, nor better or more important than—other living things. The Lislakh are prone both to a short-term, atomistic ethical perspective, and to an exceptionalist, speciesist, hierarchical ethical perspective. These two fundamentally false views have combined to disastrous effect, so that in only a few hundred years (a blink in terms of human history, and not even close to that in terms of geologic time), we may have managed to make earth nearly unlivable for us and for many of the other living things that share the planet with us. And it is no exaggeration to say, as Wub-e-ke-niew does, that this emanates directly from the Lislakh perspective, with its license and encouragement toward control, domination, hierarchy, colonization, exploitation, and the use of violence to subjugate people or creatures who stand in the way of the pursuit of short term pleasure, power, wealth, and a more and more slothful, inactive, inattentive existence.

What is perhaps most striking is that while all this has been happening over the past four- or five-hundred years, the Lislakh have at the same time convinced themselves (ourselves) of their unrivaled enlightenment, civilization, and ethical progress. As a philosopher, I feel this acutely: how is it that philosophical ethics of the past several hundred years has missed or even intentionally ignored so much

⁴ For classic work in this tradition, see the work of the Tewa philosopher Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Clear Light Publishers, 2000). See also the extensive body of work by the Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Whyte, including, for example, “Weaving Indigenous Science, Protocols and Sustainability Science,” *Sustainability Science* 11(1) (2016), pp. 25-32, co-authored with J.P. Brewer and J.T. Johnson; as well as the work of the Climate and Traditional Knowledges Workgroup, including their 2014 report, “Guidelines for Considering Traditional Knowledges in Climate Change Initiatives” available at <https://climatetkw.wordpress.com/guidelines/>

that is so obviously troubling about the Lislakh way of life? That's to paint with a broad brush, of course. In the remainder of this section, I want to draw out some of the implications of Wub-e-ke-niew's discussion of the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway and Lislakh ethical perspectives for several issues in theoretical ethics. It is hard to know how much "trickle-down" influence philosophical discussions of ethics are capable of having, but it is possible that seeing some of these issues differently might be significant. This might be part of Wub-e-ke-niew's project in writing the book, combined with his highly tempered optimism that, maybe we, the Lislakh "will end up adopting some of the Aboriginal Indigenous peoples' culture" so that "[m]aybe [the Lislakh] will become civilized, after all" (72).

The dominant ethical perspectives in Western, Lislakh philosophical ethics include Kantian deontology, various nearby contractualist (or relational) views, Aristotelian or Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, and consequentialist views. These first three share a number of components that are in significant tension with the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway perspective as presented and defended by Wub-e-ke-niew. Interestingly, the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway view has significant resonance with consequentialist views and provides improvements and insights that might be brought into useful dialogue with those views. What I say here will of necessity be only suggestive and gestural, but my hope is that it will make evident the value in exploring Wub-e-ke-niew's presentation and defense of the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway perspective.

Let us begin with the differences. First, Kantian deontology, contractualist or relational ethical views,⁵ and Aristotelian virtue-focused views all focus in central ways on the beliefs, intentions, reasons, motives, dispositions, maxims, plans, and character of individual agents. They look predominantly at what is going on inside of agents as those agents think and feel and react and act—rather than what is going on outside in the world. Of course, even for those views, what actually happens matters. But it is not at the center. These are *inside-ethics* ethical theories. Second, these views all focus on human beings, or the nearly extensionally equivalent "persons," interacting with other persons. The ethical focus is limited to different ways of treating and interacting with persons: thinking of them this way rather than that, treating them only this way and never that way, thinking about how and whether one could justify one's actions to them, thinking about what we owe to them, making claims of each other, asking how would I feel if a person treated me in those ways, and so on. Non-persons might factor in at various points, in various ways, but in different, almost always categorically less significant, ways.⁶ These are *person-first* ethical perspectives. Third, these views suggest that ethical assessment of an agent acting at a time is possible either at the very moment of action, or shortly thereafter—after the action has caused an intended or foreseen or "reasonably" foreseeable set of consequences (where what is "reasonable" is often indexed to the agent's subjective perspective and local community norms). What matters, ethically, are the short-term effects of the agent's action (and, particularly, the effects on other persons), what we might call the local causal contribution; or the relatively short-term things that the agent was trying to bring about, which they foresaw might be brought about, or which they "should" have foreseen (allowing for a bit of assessment of certain kinds of negligence and recklessness). These are *causally-restricted* ethical perspectives. Drawing these threads together might make it evident how one could see "ethical" people involved in factory farming, massive but (unintended and unforeseen!) environmental degradation through industrialization, and even "well-intentioned" but deeply racist and prejudiced colonization and "civilizing" projects.

⁵ Here I have in mind, most prominently, Thomas Scanlon, [What We Owe to Each Other](#) (Harvard University Press, 1998); Stephen Darwall, [The Second-person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability](#) (Harvard University Press, 2006); and R. Jay Wallace, [The Moral Nexus](#) (Harvard University Press, 2019).

⁶ For recent relevant discussions aimed at defending or modifying these views in various ways on this front, see Martha Nussbaum, [Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership](#) (Harvard University Press, 2007); Christine Korsgaard, [Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals](#) (Oxford University Press, 2018); Shelly Kagan, [How to Count Animals, more or less](#) (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Consequentialist theories—at least in their most common guises—are, by contrast, not inside-ethics, person-first, or causally-restricted. Consequentialist ethical theories suggest that we should be concerned, ethically speaking, with the effects of our actions, and all of the effects of our actions—not just those that we might have been intending or even foreseeing when acting. Nor are effects on persons the only relevant effects—although there is typically a limitation to effects on creatures that are sentient, conscious, capable of feeling pain and pleasure.

The Ahnishinahbæó'jibway perspective that Wub-e-ke-niew describes is not any kind of maximizing consequentialist view, as there is no suggestion that right action requires doing what will bring about the best consequences, however defined. But there are powerful connections here with consequentialist views with respect to the rejection of an inside-ethics, person-first, causally-restricted ethical perspective. The non-hierarchical, non-speciesist, non-anthropocentric, naturalistic, causally interconnected picture of what matters, morally, is an attractive component of consequentialist thinking—even if many resist the maximizing demands. Those elements appear in an attractive form in Wub-e-ke-niew's description of the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway ethical perspective, where “harmony” rather than maximizing utility emerges as the proper aim of ethical living. He writes:

In the ancient religious philosophy of the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway*, life is based on a circle: a circle of equals rather than a hierarchy, inter-connected spheres of life in harmony with each other.... There are no words for war, or peace, in the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* language. There is no word for God, no word for Devil.... for us all time, all thought and all action, is within the non-violent context of Grandfather *Midé* and Grandmother Earth. Our land and our forests are, and have always been, an integral part of our religion, our philosophy and our very identity as *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway*. (34-35)

One could, with some distortion, recast this view as a kind of constrained consequentialism with the good to be brought about the good of harmony with all living things, and the constraints being connected to the use of violence.⁷ I don't want to put forward that version of the view, but I do want to offer a sketch of the ethical view that emerges from Wub-e-ke-niew's book.

⁷ There are questions we might ask about what Wub-e-ke-niew asserts here and elsewhere throughout the book concerning (a) the historical reality regarding Ahnishinahbæó'jibway life and culture, (b) the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway language, and the relation these have with (c) the normative ideals or ethical theory of the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway and (d) Wub-e-ke-niew's own views about normative ideals and ethical theory. Wub-e-ke-niew is clear that he takes the language to be evidence for both the historical reality and the normative ideals. As he puts it:

Ahnishinahbæó'jibway language is more than words. It is the totality of communication in several dimensions of reality.... All languages have embedded in them the ways in which the native speakers of that language understand and interact with the world. Each language contains the history and the values of the people whose language it is.... The *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* language is balanced, both male and female, non-violent, egalitarian. Our Aboriginal Indigenous language is the compiled wisdom of hundreds of thousands of generations of our people. (215)

He is equally clear that the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway language is not identical to or even close to the “Chippewa” or “Ojibway” (or “Ojibwe”) language. He writes, “Chippewa has never been an Aboriginal Indigenous language,” and notes that “[t]he book which is mislabeled *A Dictionary of the Ojibway Language* is really a Chippewa dictionary, and has the tracks of missionaries all over it” (234). It is harder to know what Wub-e-ke-niew would say about The Ojibwe People's Dictionary project (which was started right around the time of his death), or what he would say, for example, about the fact that that dictionary offers “miigaadiwin” as equivalent to the English word “battle” or “war,” or that it offers “gizhe-manidoo” as equivalent to the English word “God.” See *The Ojibwe People's Dictionary* at <https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/>. But it is certainly possible to imagine that he would be similarly skeptical of this project as capturing the actual Ahnishinahbæó'jibway language or even a genuine Aboriginal Indigenous language. These questions of linguistic relationship I leave to others with actual knowledge and skill relevant to answering them.

The basic components are something like this:

INTERCONNECTION: all living things in a contained ecosystem (like Earth, and at much smaller scale, too) are causally interrelated and interconnected in complex ways

HARMONY: when this interrelation and interconnection is sustainably beneficial for living things within the ecosystem, we can describe it as being in a state of harmony

ETHICAL EVALUATION: actions are to be evaluated in large part, if not solely, based on their consequences with respect to harmony—do they promote and sustain harmony, or do they threaten and undermine harmony

Still, this leaves us with other questions, none of which I am going to attempt to answer here, but which seem like excellent questions for others to take up. One is the question of what we should make of his strong claims about what languages show about history and culture and values. One certainly hears echoes of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, much debated (and largely derided) by linguists and psychologists, and which has now been defended in something of a weaker form. See, for example, the introduction and a number of the chapters in Dedre Gentner and Susan Goldin-Meadow's edited volume, Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Thought (MIT Press, 2003). There are also clear resonances with J.L. Austin's defenses of "ordinary language" philosophy: "our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any that you or I are likely to think up in our armchairs of an afternoon." J.L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series, Vol. 57 (1956 - 1957), pp. 1-30. Of course, Austin also goes on to say that "ordinary language is *not* the last word," something that seems to concord with Wub-e-ke-niew's own views here. Language might reveal some of the worldview, but it is not a justification or defense of that worldview.

A second question concerns what we should think about his specific claims about Ahnishinahbæó'jibway language, culture, and history. Some of what he says is based on claims about the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway language, but much else is based on his own early experiences and in particular on the testimony and education provided to him by his family and extended community. There are some moments when it is clear that he is setting out the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway normative ideals, without making further claims that they were always or consistently lived up to in practice. But in other moments he says stronger things about thousands of years of actual harmonious, non-violent, warless existence. With very good reason, Wub-e-ke-niew is wary of those academics and other outsiders—historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, social workers—who have brought their Lislakh perspective with them while studying and writing about Aboriginal Indigenous groups like the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway. Much of this work has been terrible—from both an epistemic and moral vantage point. More recent, perhaps better work, done with and by Aboriginal Indigenous people, certainly holds out more promise for helping us to evaluate these claims. Given what we are learning about the historical record and incredibly long time-span during which Aboriginal Indigenous groups lived in particular places through what we now call North America (see note 11 below), I am inclined to view my own Lislakh, skeptical perspective on the possibility of extended non-violent, warless, non-hierarchical, egalitarian, sustainable social living with suspicion. It's not as if Hobbes presented any evidence for his claims about "human nature." And it does seem that the historical record supports the view that many Aboriginal Indigenous groups did exist in some of these very places for thousands of years prior to the arrival of Western Europeans. But this is an interesting and important question for further inquiry by people better placed to do this work than I am.

A final question concerns whether and how the historical claims matter. Wub-e-ke-niew is clearly articulating an ethical view. It would definitely seem to be a point in favor of that view if wide-scale adoption of that view had in fact been both possible and causally responsible for thousands of years of non-violent, egalitarian, sustainable, harmonious existence of communities of significant numbers of people. But that is not the only argument in favor of the view. And it could be an attractive ethical view even if no one has ever lived up to its requirements, particularly given that it does not seem to include any components that make it in principle impossible or even unreasonably difficult to live up to its requirements. So, I am inclined to see the historical claims as very powerful if true, but I don't think the interest of the view turns on them. By saying that, I in no way intend to imply that I doubt the historical claims—let me say that explicitly to cancel any possible implicature.

NO CAUSAL RESTRICTIONS: whether an action promotes or threatens harmony is a function of its full causal effects

ALL THINGS MATTER: all living things matter, morally

These seem to be central parts of the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway view as presented by Wub-e-ke-niew.

With this much of the picture in view, some further questions arise naturally. Do all living things matter *equally*? On one interpretation, the reason all living things matter is *because* of INTERCONNECTION, perhaps in combination with some principle of uncertainty and acknowledgment of our epistemic limitation: we don't know which things will end up having effects on which other things. This would be something of an instrumental version of the view. But that doesn't seem well grounded in the text. Wub-e-ke-niew writes, for example:

In my great-grandfather's time, old growth forests covered more than half of this Continent, from the Atlantic Ocean to the tallgrass prairies west of the Mississippi. The trees rose to meet the skies, and the sentience of these ancient living beings was a part of our *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* community, part of the seamless continuity of time. (91-92)

The view seems to be that all living things matter morally, that there is no hierarchy of importance, and that this is because all living things have intrinsic or final significance.⁸ It might even be getting the view wrong to focus overly much on discrete individual living things as having intrinsic or final significance. It might be that even this fails to appreciate the truly seamless continuity that exists as a result of interconnection, so that what matters morally is somehow both the harmony of the whole and the way each individual entity participates in that whole. These are hard issues both at an interpretive and theoretical level, and there is not room to resolve them here.⁹

There is an interesting view—although probably not the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway view—that ends up with non-hierarchical moral egalitarianism but through instrumentalist considerations. On this view, egalitarian commitments arise from the empirical facts about INTERCONNECTION, not a theoretical view about moral status. We all matter equally because we all have an equally important role in the ecosystem—or because we all stand in equal or nearly equal relations of dependence on and vulnerability to other living things. It is precisely the instrumental picture that yields the egalitarianism, rather than some non-instrumental intrinsic/final good view that generates the egalitarianism.

At one point in time, many readers of this—human beings, all of you—might have scoffed at the suggestion of mutual vulnerability and dependence. Surely, we human beings can use and control and dominate as we see fit! Those other creatures might depend on us (and our generosity or good will), but the reverse is surely not true! But I assume few readers feel nearly as confidently independent now.

⁸ Wub-e-ke-niew attributes “sentience” to the old growth forest trees and suggests that this sentience was a part of the community. Some readers might find this implausible, but in addition to reading the book under discussion here, I would also recommend to them Peter Wohlleben's [The Hidden Life of Trees](#) (Greystone Books, 2015), which at least makes evident the sheer interest and complexity of forests and the trees that comprise them. They might not satisfy some criteria for “sentience” focused on by philosophers, but they might also suggest the need to rethink that focus when thinking about what matters, morally.

⁹ For recent work taking up some of these issues from an Indigenous Native American perspective, see Brian Burkhart, [Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures](#) (Michigan State University Press, 2019), particularly Chapters Four through Six.

I want to make two other points—both about connections between epistemic concerns and moral ones. It is a common objection to “causally unrestricted” ethical views like consequentialism that they cannot serve as a decision procedure by which we can decide what to do, because, from our limited epistemic vantage point, we do not know what the full long-term (and long-long-long term) consequences of our actions will be.¹⁰ I have always taken this to be a serious objection to consequentialism as an ethical theory. But Wub-e-ke-niew’s articulation of the Ahnishinahbæó’jibway view and way of life suggests an important kind of response on behalf of causally unrestricted views; namely, whether we can know (or at least have justified beliefs) about the long-long-long term consequences of our actions depends on the context in which we take those actions, as well as on the extent to which those actions are in an important sense unprecedented or not. The combination of INTERCONNECTION and NO CAUSAL RESTRICTIONS might seem to suggest an impossible epistemic demand: having to come to know or have reasonable and justified views about all of the consequences of one’s actions across a wide range of domains. In the modern context, in reacting to consequentialism, we do often act like this is impossible—and we have created a world in which it might be. But it is worth reflecting on that.

Imagine someone in Wub-e-ke-niew’s situation, or perhaps better, that of his great-grandparents. They had been living in a way, and in a particular place, that they knew to be basically the same as those of their parents, and their grandparents, and their great-grandparents—back for thousands of years. Wub-e-ke-niew writes:

Ahnishinahbæó’jibway understanding of space, place, and land is different from that of the Euro-Americans. We have a permanent relationship with specific places, defined partly in terms of our permaculture. My people of the Bear *Dodem* had a certain sugarbush, where we tapped our trees, made our sugar from one year to the next. We harvested and processed our *mahnomen* in the same place, century after century. Our permanent residences—our community of longhouses—had been in the same place for millennia. There were specific places where we fished, where our gardens were, where we hunted, where our fruits and nuts and medicines and everything else that we needed were maintained by our people.... *This* land, right here, is where my many-times-great-grandfather of the Bear *Dodem* was born about 27,000 B.C., where he lived and died.... This land is the open, living textbook of *Ahnishinahbæó’jibway* history, values, philosophy and religion... (3-4)

The *Midé*, the comprehensive religion/philosophy of the Ahnishinahbæó’jibway, is described by Wub-e-ke-niew as providing a way of acting toward harmony. He says of it:

The *Midé* is so vast, it’s impossible to describe how it makes me feel, but one of the words which comes to mind is humility. The *Midé* is a compilation of the wisdom of my people over the course of about a million years, as well as the tools for understanding reality. (8)

This body of knowledge, combined with the facts of deep connection to particular, specific places,¹¹ makes the consequences of one’s actions—if one learns, and listens, and follows—considerably less

¹⁰ A somewhat more subtle and perhaps more profound version of the objection suggests that consequentialism can’t even be correct as a criterion of the rightness of actions, on the grounds that it would seem to leave open or epistemically uncertain the rightness (or wrongness) of actions for which we are certain of the action’s status as right or wrong. For discussion, see James Lenman, “Consequentialism and Cluelessness,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* Vol. 29, No. 4 (Autumn, 2000), pp. 342-370.

¹¹ There are ongoing archeological and anthropological debates about how long people have been living in what is now called North America. The Bering Strait Theory, which suggests that people arrived via a land bridge across the Bering Strait, had people migrating for the first time around 13,000 years ago, and

uncertain. At least if the overall ethical focus is not dominated by focus on the potentially unpredictable and messy details of human interpersonal interactions, but is concerned in a broader way with HARMONY, taking that to be of central ethical importance in the evaluation of actions or character. It then seems that a causally unrestricted ethical theory might not be implausible—either as a decision procedure or a criterion of rightness—at least given certain background social conditions. But it would also seem to motivate a duty or ethical responsibility to create and preserve social conditions that would make morally good action possible, even acknowledging our non-omniscience and epistemic limitations.

The second point concerning connections between ethical and epistemic concerns is closely related. Once one accepts an ethical view on which all things matter, all things are interconnected, and the effects of one's actions matter in a causally unrestricted way, it makes evident the corresponding need for high epistemic sensitivity and observation of the world around oneself, and the importance of proceeding with caution when breaking with precedent in dramatic ways. Importantly, what we need to know about isn't just other people, or how what we are doing might affect them. All knowledge—including what we might call scientific knowledge or knowledge of the natural world—becomes essential to acting ethically. Indeed, many Indigenous and Native American philosophers stress that “all knowledge” is properly directed at “finding the proper moral and ethical road upon which human beings should walk.”¹² Unfortunately, many of us, as I suggested in the opening, are significantly closed off from the natural world, from the way in which our actions produce and sustain disharmony. There is not an easy route from where we are to anything like the deeply placed existence that Wub-e-ke-niew describes. Although we are all interconnected, we have acted in horribly short-sighted ways, and our survival, along with the survival of many other living things, is connected in complicated ways to whole systems of life and environment that we are coming to understand too late.

Wub-e-ke-niew and other Indigenous philosophers have been making these points long before “climate change” and the “Anthropocene” were a part of our vocabulary. There is a powerful case that if we are assessing which worldview—both in terms of the conception of time and the conception of ethics—is “better,” in terms of producing better results, the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway perspective is better. Wub-e-ke-niew makes this point starkly in some of the closing words of the book:

The abundant permaculture, the magnificent forests, the pristine waters and the multitude of other beings who lived in harmony with *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* and other Aboriginal Indigenous people, are the embodiment of our language, our culture, our egalitarian values, and our thought and our ways of life. Western European civilization has had five hundred years on this Continent to prove the “superiority” that they asserted when they first came here. The ecosystem is shattered, their cities are ripped by violence, and the American Dream has always been an illusion for many... If there is to be hope for anybody in the future, we have to work together to recreate a network of harmonious societies which provide for all people. (242-43)

now seems clearly false—at least if suggested as the first arrival of human beings on the continent. There is extensive evidence that there have been people in North and South America since at least 15,000 years ago, before the land bridge would have been passable. And there is evidence that suggests people might have been present even as much as 20,000 or 30,000 years ago—although it is harder to be sure given the archaeological traces and limited record. Many Indigenous groups—not just the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway—claim historical, generational continuity for tens of thousands of years. For an overview of some of the evidence and debates, see Craig Childs, *Atlas of a Lost World: Travels in Ice Age America* (Pantheon, 2018).

¹² Vine Deloria in *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr., Reader* (edited by Kristen Foehner, Sam Scinta, and Barbara Deloira, Fulcrum, 1999), p. 43. See also Burkhart (2019), pp. 251-57 for further discussion.

V.

This volume encourages reflection on what it is for something to be a “classic” and what it is for something to be “neglected.”

I don’t know what makes something a classic. For my taste, it seems as if it should have something to do with how perspective-altering the work is—perhaps for how many people it is perspective-altering also matters, although maybe we all care primarily about a work’s effect on us. Perspective alteration is a function both of how different the ideas are from one’s own (how creative, imaginative, and perhaps simply unfamiliar), but also how compelling those ideas are. That will make “classic” status relative to one’s own perspective upon encountering the work. For most readers of this essay, who will come to the work from the broad Lislakh perspective, I am confident the book will at least do well on the former score. I hope that what I have said so far suggests that it might also do well on the latter score as well.

Neglect, well, that is easier. I would not know of this book if it had not been mentioned to me by the Native American philosopher Anne Waters (who is one of the first Native Americans to receive a PhD in Philosophy). Thank you, Dr. Waters, for bringing it to my attention, and for your work to bring Native American and Indigenous philosophical ideas to broader attention more generally. Noam Chomsky blurbs the back of it, in part as a result of his personal correspondence with Wub-e-ke-niew. But the book is virtually uncited, and although it is known within the small circle of people who work on Indigenous and Native American Philosophy, it should have a much wider audience than it presently has. I hope you will become part of that audience.