

**MORALITY AND KNOWLEDGE
TEACHINGS FROM A NAVAJO EXPERIENCE ¹**

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In honor of a great people

The study of aspects of other peoples' culture and society is still generally held to be next to irrelevant for the problems and peculiarities of our system. At best the other is a curiosity, but for sure his world is so much more simple and straightforward than ours. It is not uncommon one can hear these others laugh aloud over such stupidity: My opinion then, is the exact opposite of this current Western conviction. However, no systematic discussion of this point will be attempted: some problems relating to a universalistic position have been dealt with elsewhere (e.g. Pinxten, 1976). In the present paper, then, the latter position is taken for granted, and then experience with Navajo Indians is interpreted as one more step towards my better understanding of man as a moral animal. A comparison of implicit Western (christian) morals and political morals with a system as different as that of the Navajos is developed in the hope to bring useful insights into the more fundamental aspects of the moral phenomenon, that is, most certainly those that would guarantee a synthesis or a combined understanding of both Western and Navajo moral convictions. It is agreed from the start, though, that no exhaustive treatment of Navajo moral system is possible.

1. Navajo natural philosophy.

The present paper partly grew out of discontent with a still existing trend to emphasize superficial differences in other's behavior for the 'better' understanding of one's own peculiarities. Scholars

from M. Mead to C. Turnbull have excelled in this behavioristically blended and dubious art of superficiality, leading to nothing more than surprising scarcity of methodological concern together with well established misunderstanding of the first victims of this ideological enterprise : the native peoples, who are given the role to stand in contrast to the Western style (ample literature is now becoming available on the deficiencies of this type of research : e.g. Cole et al., 1971, Fabian, 1971 and in press).

It is my conviction that the study of the *natural philosophy* of a people is a necessary part of, if not an absolute prerequisite for research into their moral codes, values and preferences. It would be a fascinating enterprise to analyse the ways the problems of translatability vary according to the omission, resp. the taking into account of those basic levels of conceptualization. In the case of Navajo studies the complex and highly ambiguous (from the point of view of the Westerner) moral system seems to gain from insights in the natural philosophy of the people². Moreover, the interaction and communication with consultants, in my experience, tended to become more oriented toward genuine collaboration and deeper mutual interest the more the consultants were taken seriously on their philosophical explanations : the fact that this kind of knowledge is sacred and thus hard to get, changes the entire communicative situation. One point this type of events seems to illustrate, in my opinion at least, is that at the very least for Navajos and for Whites alike sincere information on moral rules and habits is delicate material and should be treated, on both sides, with respect.

One final remark is due in order to shed light on the following sections : a short presentation of some of the basic natural philosophical positions of the Navajos is given as an introduction to the better understanding of their moral system. Apart from the research economic and human interactional reasons mentioned above, this procedure seems absolutely necessary in order to grasp the moral positions in a serious and honest representation. The understanding of the moral order is, I argue with this paper, highly dependent on the Navajo knowledge about nature and world : ethics/politics and metaphysics/epistemology are so closely linked in their positions and concepts that the study of one can serve as the prerequisite cultural context for the study of the other. In some case studies on Navajo this interrelationship was not clearly recognized : e.g. Reichard (1950, p. 112) speaks about the 'transfer of supernatural forces' involved in medicine man practices, whereas a simple understanding of the conceptualisation of nature as a dynamic and highly interrelated set of organisms and units (cfr. below) could

easily explain the same phenomena without recurrence to more obscurantism in the minds of the people.

*1.1 Navajo concepts of time and space.*³

The Navajo world view speaks of a finite, closed, harmonious and dynamic universe.

(a) The world is finite in time and space : the existing phenomena and processes will come to an end at some time, just like the individual human being has a certain amount of energy and capacities to be made use of by her or him in one lifetime. Spatially, the Navajo world is conceived of as the territory, air and sky that is seen to expand within the boundary of the Four Sacred Mountains (one in each direction : east, south, west, north; cfr. e.g. Franciscan Fathers, 1910).

(b) This world is closed, that is, it is considered to be fundamentally different in nature and quality from that of any foreign people (e.g. Zuñi, Ute, but also Mexicans, Whites, etc..., in fact, all non-Navajos). Influences from 'outside' are primarily considered strange to or different from Navajo customs, and are most often seen as dangerous for the people, while the typical Navajo way of handling things is believed to be generally and intrinsically justified.

(c) The universe is harmonious : there are elements of chaos and disruption, together with elements of benefit, prosperity and continuity in this world; there is death and rebirth ("reincarnation"); there is a possibility to use one's ingenuity and mental strength in order to live a long and happy life, as there are elements that favour risk and danger in the human mind (eg., Reichard, 1950). This general idea of bipolarity in all and everything is a basic feature of the Navajo universe : human courage and intelligence are measured through the performance of individuals to reach longevity and happiness in a context that is partly to be defined by themselves.

(d) The universe is dynamic : nothing is really still, defined, objectified. Instead, everything that can be seen, touched or even thought, is embedded in a continuous cycle of 'becoming (more) manifest', 'becoming real'. The idea can be grasped more easily, I guess, when time is considered as one dimension in a genuine fourdimensional spacetime⁴ : phenomena have depth, length and width, as well as a certain degree of 'manifestness', of 'having become (real)'. This aspect of the Navajo time concept stresses a characteristic that differs from the ones focused earlier in this paper : all forms, structures, processes, entities in the present Navajo world

are involved in a continuous 'becoming', in a progression from mere existence in a shapeless form (our notion of future is not recognized as relevant), passing through a single moment of 'being manifest', 'being here and now' (our notion of 'present', restricted to an absolute moment of experience) and ending in an indefinite period of 'not existing anymore' or 'having been manifest'. It is clear the simple Western metaphor 'time is an arrow' (e.g. Fraser, 1974) is not appropriate here: the continuum does not appear as such, but is constructed through a delicate and multilevel process of manifestation or becoming. The temporal phenomena, moreover, are *not* exclusively situated outside of and dominant vis-à-vis the human being. Instead, any individual Navajo has a direct and decisive impact on things, specifically through their temporal aspect. First, one masters one's own time up to some degree: a human being is said to have a determined and particular amount of possibilities, valuable characteristic and power within her or him and is expected to make use of these during his lifetime. It depends largely on the will and intelligence of the particular person how long his life will last and what use he can make of the richness he incorporates: if he uses his intelligence the right way, he will live a long life of wellbeing and die respectfully at old age, i.e., 'after he made use of everything he had'. The impact of humans on the actual definition of lifetime (indeed, in a somewhat Bergsonian interpretation of time) is clearly understood here. The same notion of man-dependent time is again apparent at a micro-level: at any time in a human being's life anything particular that is really wanted can realize itself, provided the person is faithful. He or she should keep thinking about the object of desire, dreaming and caring about it and wishing it would come his way. In this way 'gradually, it will become real through care for it'. In this particular instance, the temporal aspects of things 'not yet fully manifest' are unambiguously considered under the influence of the will power of the human being. Within the same scope, I conjecture, the possibility of witchcraft gets another connotation for the Navajo: through thought people can achieve a certain power over things and over other people, to the better or to the worse of the latter. Again in the same perspective it is not surprising that, as we experienced frequently when talking about the more knowledgeable people among the Navajos, people who are held in high esteem because of their knowledge and intellectual strength are, at the same time, more often than not suspected of witchcraft or feared for malicious powers. These remarks were only meant to show that the notion of time of the Navajos have consequences on other domains of reality as well, including on moral principles and behavior.

1.2. Navajo natural order : *hózhóónjǐ* .⁵

A basic dimension of Navajo concepts on nature and existence is presented in the notion of order. The very difficult term *hózhóónjǐ* gives important insights into native perspectives on this point. The term and its derivatives is used to describe any constellation, series of events and any complex phenomenon that display, according to Navajo opinion, orderliness, beauty, happiness, a good way of being. In an esoteric context the term is used to denote the whole rite or rather set of chants and ritual behaviors that have to do with the good, beautiful and/or correct way of existing. The translation then usually is Blessingway or Beautyway (e.g. Wyman, 1975). The recognition of a unique and delineated set of beliefs in chants and rituals in this sense is not without importance : indeed, opposite to and complementary to these convictions and acts for the continuous reinstallation and correction of the correct and healthy picture of the world, there is a clearly delineated set of practices and corresponding beliefs that focuses the non-Navajo and hence the dangerous and enigmatic way of doing. The latter are put together in a second set of Navajo ceremonials : Enemyway. These fundamental chantways both are to be considered the explicit and unifying bodies of theory and ceremonial practices of the Navajo cultural identity. Blessingway is the more basic still, since parts of it are sung even at the closing of any Enemyway chant (and not the other way around). It has been called the 'backbone of the Navajo religion' by Navajo Indians and anthropologists alike (cfr. again Wyman, 1975); its central position in the Navajo traditional religion at the same time guarantees accessibility to basic emphases in the Navajo philosophy of nature to be grasped unambiguously. Indeed, the mere stress on beauty-order-harmony in the very name (in Navajo) of this corpus of traditional beliefs is of tremendous significance.

As in the esoteric knowledge, in the same way in the practical and often less sophisticated types of knowledge about the native world view, the stress on the notion of order-beauty-harmony is a constant one. Essentially this conviction takes the form of following statements : a) a certain abstract 'good way' of existing, healthily and harmoniously coexisting of all things up, above and under the earth, was laid down with Creation. b) human beings are part of this Creation and thus can, through the use of their thought most of all, try to live according to this ideal 'good way' and thus live a long and happy life.

Orderliness-beauty-harmony thus is seen as a characteristic of

reality, though not or not necessarily one that is actually manifest in phenomenal reality. At the same time, however, it is an ideal form of things, of human being's way of behaving, and of relationships between aspects of reality. Human beings, through their knowledge and thought can have an impact on the course of events : they can either spoil things or keep in pace with, resp. make more manifest the ideal form of reality. The input of human beings is delicately measured, so to speak : it is through their own good sense that they should decide what actions and reactions would be appropriate in any circumstance, while reality will 'reward' them for good decisions by providing a long and happy life, or 'punish' them by the occurrence of calamities or by their untimely death. No rules in any strict sense are printed out, no clearcut commands seem to be dictated : it is through the use of observational and intellectual capacities that are inherited by human beings and through the avoidance of excesses of any kind in the relationship with any aspect of the world, that orderliness-happiness-harmony will be favored most of all. It is not out of the question to take risks and to engage in unusual reasonings and actions : sometimes you will thus hit upon a good and beneficial idea, while other times you may harm yourself or the situation of your people.

It will be clear from the foregoing short exposition that much remains illdefined or even undefinable : this is not so much the result of the analysis, but, as far as we understand, from the notion of *hózhóǫ́nǫ́jí* itself. There is no definite list of precepts and rules that can be pointed at, since Navajo ontology does not allow notions of strict and static order. This point has wideranging interest for anybody interested in the conceptualization of dynamic world views and corresponding ethics : the very notion of order of Western static ontology bears no relevance here and should be completely altered into an essentially dynamic and fuzzy notion of orderliness throughout phases of manifestation. This program goes beyond the scope of the present paper; however, at least one consequence on moral issues may be kept in mind : since there is no static reality, there can be no static ideal form, and hence probably no definite idea as to how to reach this ideal form, i.e. no definite set of strategies that will lead to salvation. It is precisely these aspects, and their logical connectedness to the ontological assumptions outlined above that will have our attention now.

2. A peculiarity of the Navajo theory of knowledge.

In logical consistency with the foregoing remarks it can now be

understood that, to the Navajos, knowledge is a property. This statement is now elaborated.

In the first place it should be kept in mind that Navajos were and still are up to some degree, a nomadic people. This implies that private property is a rather irrelevant, sometimes even discomforting attribute : indeed, the nomad typically carries his possessions with him from place to place, and property of land, houses, in fact anything that is 'too big or heavy to take along easily' is a nuisance. The Navajos are in no way an exception to this role, as has been shown in detail by Haile (1968). However, some types of things or attributes are in title to be considered private property still, in a somewhat different meaning : some sacred paraphernalia (like the medicine man pouch), but also names, ideas, and material things like jewels and the like. The list is short, and somewhat strange for the Western eye (cfr. Haile, 1968 for a full list) : indeed, one of the more valuable items on it is knowledge.

In previous sections the role of thought in subsistence and the characteristic aspect of power involved with knowledge has been stressed : through the use of his thought and his knowledge a person can understand (and thus influence) the external world, and consequently live a long and happy life. The role of *ni'ch'i* (wind, air, vital force) is important here : *nīlch'i* inhabits all things that were created and is the source of their being dynamic; at the same time it is the connection between human beings and the world around, the messenger, the inspiring force one has to learn to listen to ('*ni'ch'i* goes through you and tells you things' one informant would tell us). Through thinking human beings can learn to understand and interpret this vital force in the world; through knowledge from others who know and from one's own testing of hypotheses about the world, one gradually learns the way of things. At every level of intellectual sophistication, a certain amount of power, of subsistence capacity is thus gained by the knower. Complementary to this given of Navajo knowledge structure, the world, overall creation is seen as a closed system as mentioned, and human beings as 'containers' of limited capacity within that system. That is to say, as said before, human beings have a limited amount of possibilities or capacities that can be made use of. The equilibrium system, that a human being seems to be within this framework, then has a certain autonomy to regulate or risk the equilibrium at will, resulting in more perfect harmony or happiness, or in disruption and disequilibrium, even premature death. There is no divine force or personality that intervenes throughout this process : the combination and interaction of natural forces in the outside world and the potentialities and free

will decisions of the acting and thinking individual make for the full scenery⁶. Extrapolating somewhat further, it looks as if the Navajos state that human beings essentially deal with the laws of nature and their own desires to make up their life. The purely naturalistic characters that play a role in healing ceremonies (religious acts) of Navajos seem to corroborate this interpretation. It should be kept in mind, however, that this interpretation is arrived at analytically, not directly from the empirical material we could elicit.

One supplementary information on the meaning of 'closedness' of the world is appropriate here : human beings are, to a much greater extent than is the case in the Western world view, a genuine and simple *part* of the totality; that is, they are just one node in a somewhat Levistraussian, non hierarchical network of natural phenomena, and have to try to behave accordingly. It is particularly in this respect that knowledge is of absolute importance : through his knowledge and heuristic procedures a human being becomes aware, learns about, defines his place in the network constantly and progressively. The 'divine' rule, so to speak, the essential leitmotiv of all knowledge is then to try and find out more exactly what man's place is in the whole setting and, subsequently, to live according to it.

In this way, the function of knowledge has become clear. This does not make any clearer, however, why and how knowledge should be private property to anyone. A few examples we encountered may shed light on the actual meaning of this expression.

At several instances consultants refused to talk about certain sacred parts of knowledge to us, white people. The particular parts they objected to differed from person to person. Moreover, whenever it became clear we already knew about the things we asked, all barriers were torn down : some started with 'since you already know, I can tell you that...'. This reluctance to speak about some matters, however, is not limited to contact with white people, as could be suspected : instead, any Navajo under the age of say 40 is bound to have little higher knowledge, since nobody of the elder thinks him worth to know a lot already. In the same way, only people beyond a certain age (about 70-80) are liable to begin to tell things to others, while those under it will refuse. One consultant (60 years of age) sincerely urged us to come back in 20 years to ask a certain range of questions, 'since he could not tell us these things at his age'. Very old people generally start telling the most sacred things when they feel death is not too far away : our consultant Curly Mustache, a verymuch esteemed thinker of 106 years and a brilliant orator and philosopher of his people, started telling things several

years back. A few weeks before his death, he was very sought for by potential wise men; he confided he did tell everything he knew to his daughter, except for two things he would take with him in his grave. The peculiarity of this statement of so brilliant a man as him, and most of all the concreteness of the exception (two things) is a puzzling information. The eagerness with which his decision was talked about and respectfully appreciated by his 'apprentices' (all over 60) clearly illuminated the importance of the event. What to make of all this ?

Human beings have power through a better understanding of their place in the world. Some individuals are recognised to have greater qualifications in this respect (e.g. the person of Curly Mustache) : they are considered to be able to think clearly and express their thoughts in clear statements. Theirs is the role of 'speaker' or leader in a nonconventional way. The moment they lose these capacities, their status is altered. Other individual are less busy with knowledge, and therefore stick with less esoteric and more conventional ideas, or depend upon the 'speaker' and his opinion to strengthen his place in the world events. The thinker does not have any direct or constant social power by virtue of his position, but claims to have mental power, i.e. a good interpretation of the phenomena of the outside world and man's place among them. He will not delegate his insights to others easily, and will wait until late in his lifetime to tell anything at all. The first circumstance is explicitly defended by some with reference to the danger involved : any knowledge can be used, but of course it can be abused as well. This should be prevented. Therefore, knowledge is spread very selectively and transfered in person to person contacts to people that can be trusted and are considered old and responsible enough to use it properly and for the benefit of themselves and others. No explicit initiation is provided here, but, still, knowledge is transfered as if it were secret. All this, of course, is in striking contrast to the Western (and scientific) rationale : a quintessential characteristic of knowledge for us is its publicness, its delegation to as many persons as possible. The second aspect, i.e. the fact that the knower waits as long as possible to communicate anything is more difficult to understand. The only explicit explanations we could get on this point stressed the fact that 'the departing from knowledge means the loss of it, for the one who knows (knew) and tends to weaken him' and 'when you tell too much, you die'. The circumstance of the actual 'trade' of knowledge in the ethnographic contact corroborates this interpretation : once a man consented to give his opinion, to express his knowledge on a particular point, the receiver (we as ethnographers) were clearly

allowed to do whatever we wanted with it. It was 'ours' for ever after. Negotiations always took place before the actual transfer, and the speaker's responsibility ended irrefutably after the transfer. While this information corroborates the interpretation we proposed, it is not sufficient explanation. One more argument could be found in the notion of lifetime, as dealt with above : someone who lives a long time *de facto* must have a more valid survival criterion than others, i.e. the people who die early in their life, or in general any younger person. In analogy with this notion, we conjecture that the knowledge of the older person then can be said to have more survival value than that of younger people, because of the evident circumstance that the elder was able to survive on it and through it till very old age. It should be concluded in the same train of reasoning that the departing of this knowledge weakens the speaker because of the fact that his criterion now is shared by a second one (within the same finite and closed universe). This interpretation is ours, — we were unable to elicit anything comparable from consultants themselves —, and it is presented as the best provisional insight we have.

Making abstraction of all specific data in the foregoing analysis it emerges clearly and definitely that knowledge is considered as a product of long and careful thought, observation and attention, and that it is the sole property of the one who produced it. He or she can subsequently depart from it, sell it or give it away once, in a relationship he or she recognizes as appropriate⁷.

3. *Navajo moral and political notions.*

A primary delimitation of our interest in this paper should be mentioned : we are concerning ourselves with argumentations and explanations leading to justification of specific choices, particular preferences in the Navajo system. of moral and political convictions and behaviors. In general, justification is secured by broader metaphysical, viz. religious beliefs, and the consultants will always refer to the latter in order to make valid arguments of justification. The numerous mythical stories and chants display the cores of mythical beliefs that are used as final, ultimate frame in this respect.

What we are concerned with in this paper is the way basic moral notions (good and bad, right and wrong, and the like) are conceived of in the Navajo way. In the second place, we are aiming to emphasize the particular relationship of consistency on symmetry one could almost say that can be recognized between these moral/political concepts and the cognitive categories outlined in

previous sections

3.1. General notions in Navajo morals and political convictions

The following remarks are only meant to give a broad insight in the Navajo treatment of 'oughts'. While the moral principles were observed to be still effectively followed, the political guidelines, and the bulk of political thought, have been superseded completely by now by the Western institutions that were installed and made obligatory in recent decades.

In moral affairs, a pervading characteristic is apparent from the fact that in all actions, wishes, and attributes of human beings presumably opposing tendencies are coupled in the particular behaviour displayed : nothing is good, but in a sense always good and bad at a time, nothing is beneficent in se, but beneficent and dangerous at once, and so on. Essential in this way of viewing the moral dimension is a systematic lack of ontologization (making it ontologically real) in this respect. An anecdote will illustrate this statement : during our stay on the reservation we were told of a gathering of old men who came together to discuss the strange and (for them) doubtful pretensions of Christianity. The discussion was started by one man who stated that he understood the Christians claimed to have a man (Jesus, as prophet) who was believed to be able to distinguish strictly and systematically between good and bad; the idea was visualized as the drawing of a line between two sets of actions, convictions, resulting in the grouping of all good on the one side and of all bad on the other side of the line. The point was raised because, as the old man said, it was hard to grasp for any Navajo how this could ever be done, 'since they did not have any such distinction in their tradition'. Of course, what is done essentially in the Christian tradition on this point is prescribing an ontic status to good and bad, so that particular events, behaviour and thoughts can be classified neatly and distinctly with one of both classes. There is not only a specific codification, but indeed a claim of ontological reality of the distinctions introduced here. Such cognitive (but politically significant) procedure is absent in Navajo tradition, except for the highest ethnic reasoning : the Navajo way is the proper way, because that is according to the structure and system of the things created. At the level of practical moral decisions, and at that of moral reasoning, no such notions are to be found, but instead so-called good and bad aspects always go hand in hand with any particular instance⁸.

Apart from the foregoing feature, there is the acceptance of a

certain amount of determinism in the Navajo world : it is held that temperament, parts of someone's character and a good deal of natural phenomena are all determined, unalterably laid down in the laws of nature and reality to some extent. Complying with this predetermined set of mechanisms in the world is the primary task of any individual Navajo, as it is for the people in general. Since, within the particular type of closed world view that is theirs, Navajos cannot alter or recreate or enlarge the things that were laid down with Creation, in any deep and far-reaching sense, any individual is held to comply to this natural order within his capacity. This situation seems to restrict any positive addition to the real world; it does not restrict, as will be shown below, human beings from destroying or messing up the natural order, though.

Consistent with this general picture of Navajo morality, one can hardly find any particular, clear-cut and specifically detailing rule of behaviour : some very vague and highly general devices are known to everybody, but no commandments or precepts as such can be pointed at. In particular cases, some restrictions are expressed, as if it were taboos : they pertain to places, ways of walking, eating, and incest. Their number is small and they always seem to have a strict connection with particular mythological beliefs. Other than these, every individual human being is expected to make his own project of life, to try and make the best of it himself : nobody feels particularly competent or dares to proclaim his wisdom on matters of moral decisions and vital questions.

Finally, sanctions take another form than in our Western tradition. In the first place, Navajos recognize a kind of Rousseauan sanctions, that is, if one acts contrary to the laws and the principles of nature, one will get 'punished' sooner or later by falling ill, ev. by dying at early age. It cannot be said, we understand, in any really sensible way that people are punished this way : rather, they take too much risks and thus trigger counter effects on themselves. There is no such thing as a personality of natural or supernatural order that keeps judging and punishing people. In the same sense, the solution so to speak, the response of the social environment on somebody's 'bad' behaviour is unalterably the organization of a ceremony to cure him of his illness.

A brief note is necessary here on 'curing a disease' : a disease never is solely or even predominantly physical in Navajo tradition (cfr. also Reichard, 1939), but fundamentally it is a social, existential and psychological disruption (with or without distinct physical effects and symptoms). As such the curing is, as we witnessed ourselves with respect to the healing of our main consultant at some point, a social event : it appeared to us to be a social and emotional reintegration

of the patient, first of all⁹. The detection or recognition of any specific disease, the act of making up a diagnosis, is the task of diagnosticians (handtremblers, stargazers and windlisteners) who seem to have a good knowledge of social circumstances of the patient, and who come to their diagnosis through elaborate questioning of the patient and members of his family, apart from more specifically esoteric practicers during their work. It was striking to us that throughout these procedures that are linked to the mishaps or misdeeds of any person, no notion of punishment was perceived as basic in the attitudes involved, but rather efforts towards social and emotional reintegration could be discerned.

The political notions in Navajo society tend to be rather artificial, as mentioned before, through the enforcement of Western ways of organizing this part of human relations. Only some aspects will be mentioned in detail, namely those having to do with family life. In general, the dominant role of women (matrilinearity and matrilocality) and the respect for elderly people in the family are striking. A short paragraph on witchcraft is due as well.

3.2. Some detailed moral and political concepts. Examples.

3.2.1. Respect because of interrelatedness.

Time and again the notion of 'respect' turned up in discussions on the good way to live, the proper way to behave, and so on. Examples are easy to collect. A sample may suffice :

— anything that lives and grows should be handled with respect : this is shown concretely in the practice of using all sorts of plants and animals that are edible by man in such a way that only that amount is used (killed, resp. collected) that can be eaten or used in another way, but not more than is necessary. In the same way, one should never tear the last specimen of any plant one uses (any animal one will eat), but leave at least a sufficient amount in order to continue its existence on earth. A dramatic instance is known from the Stock Reduction policy of the US Government on the Navajo reservation (during World War II) : huge amounts of sheep and goats were killed or even just destroyed (in the Canyon de Chelly area) in order to reduce the amount of animals and restrict effects of overgrazing, but no Navajo understood this 'technocratic measure' since it countered any kind of 'oughts' they agree on. Older people still talked bitterly about it to us, mentioning the great disrespect displayed in that particular government action.

— older people should be respected in their ways and their

knowledge, since the very fact that they reached old age speaks of their better understanding of the proper way of living in this world. Parents should be respected 'because, since one is born from them, one can never get ahead of them (bydefinition). This reference to the natural state of affairs is the final argument.

— excess in any sense or form is harmful and thus to be avoided. Indeed, rich people are to be blamed, since they collect things that could be needed by others : they unnecessarily take things out of circulation, act as if things could be fixed, while the natural way of things is to be on the move, going around, being in a continuous circulation. Very poor people display the same attitude at the other extreme. It should be reminded there is nothing bad, harmful or disrespectful in being poor or rich at any particular moment within a continuous stream of ups and downs; rather it is the fixation so to speak in one of these extremes that is wrong. (Any temporary phase can be altered through the appropriate ceremony, reinstalling the proper relationships with the universal forces). Excesses in greed, jealousy, love, work, and so on share the same status.

— specific taboos can be discerned, mostly linked to very specific animals or places : bears, snakes, lightnings as well as traces of these phenomena should be respected, that is, they will not be disturbed and the residues of their presence should be left alone (no trespassing of bear tracks, unless in a specific, ritual way, etc...). In all these cases it is believed the ancestors, rather than the phenomena themselves, are dealt with. Disobedience to this rule may inflict the offender with serious diseases, which can only be cured through expensive ceremonies.

— anything that keeps standing erect during long times (generations), or any person who grows tall, is respected in this particular feature. Particularly for rocks this respect holds that nobody will bother the solitary standing rock and will keep an area around it clear of buildings and human products. This particular awe for rock formations is not difficult to grasp for anybody who has been out on the reservation and has experienced the metaphysically inspiring formations that abound there.

In all these examples similar basic attitudes are apparent, we conjecture. It seems as if culture (i.c. the Navajo culture) is considered to be a structure that is parallel to nature and in some unprescribed way has to fit in or to be compliant with the natural order. This is consistent with the notion explained above that man is only a part of a complex mechanism, but that part that can find its place into the complex mechanism precisely through his mental and intellectual powers. Culture then, in our view, represents the more

overt part of that human response that parallels in some sense the natural structure. Respect then is a quasi logical attitude on the moral level, since it expresses both the 'fitting in' (or active) and the 'complying with' (or passive aspect) of the human being into this complex and (from the human perspective) partly defined natural order.

The objection against excesses of any kind and the particular taboos express, in our view, mere constraints on the vast domain of moral possibilities that is the human being's playground. Ultimately, of course, he has to define his position himself, mainly through his moral dimension and with the help of his mental capacities. Further aspects will highlight this view on Navajo moral theory somewhat more. Already it is important to keep in mind that the linkage we perceive between knowledge and natural philosophy on the one hand and the moral dimension that defines a supplementary and even more engaging reconstruction of the outside world, at least in our conception of the Navajo, is of great relevance: the objective is to reach *hózhóǫ́nǫ́jí* (the beautiful, orderly way), which is primarily in nature, not specifically in human beings.

3.2.2. Risk taking and going beyond; lack of guilt.

These two striking and almost appalling characteristics of Navajo morality and moral theory we recognize as two, nearly mutually opposite, constraints. On the one hand, the risk taking stresses the awareness of danger and (be it undefined) boundaries involved; the lack of guilt as the final or even as an important regulator of moral affairs enhances creativity and responsibility in a way that is quite different from the Western tradition. Both seem to enable one another, while they both act in a constraining way that is unfamiliar to our ways. The first aspect led scholars to consider Navajos as professional jokers and gamblers (which is, in a somewhat exaggerated form, the feeling one gets when reading G. Reichard, 1950), while the lack of guilt was compared by a brilliant representative of the Christian tradition as a feature of amorality (B. Haile, 1943). These aspects are difficult to grasp, for sure, since moreover the general feeling one gets when working with, observing and talking to the Navajos is a definite kind of gravity, earnestness, solemnness and utter seriousness as the most striking characteristic of behaviour and beliefs alike.

In numerous attempts to reach clarity on the point of guilt the final conclusion always had to be: it is practically inconceivable and utterly counterintuitive for a Navajo to conceive of guilt as a

regulator of behaviour, let alone of the principles of 'good' behaviour, that is, of morals. It was time and again explained to us that guilt had not much relevance to a Navajo 'since what was past, was past, nothing could be done about it any more, so why worry?'. The better attitude then, was to try and do something more beneficent, more rewarding next time. Some of the examples were pretty straightforward: 'suppose you lost or sold your horse in gambling or while drinking, then you need not feel guilty for anything, for maybe, if you started working and bought another horse, this second one could be much better than the first one; you just have to try and look out'. In the same sense, when a woman commits adultery and is caught by her man, the fault is not so much in the adultery but in the fact that the woman caused trouble here: 'if she really liked the other man better, she should have gone with him and evaded the painful and troublesome events with her first husband'. It is easy to see why these statements would oblige clergymen, even as talented and genuinely interested as Berard Haile, to speak of 'amoral' people¹⁰. However, this lack of the famous, but particular, regulator does not entail moral chaos at all. Something can be learnt from the vocabulary used: the nearest our consultants got in translating the word 'guilt' was in using *yánizín*, meaning shame, a feeling of being disrespectful. The counterpart in our moral system, the attitude of being responsible for one's deeds, acting in a sense of responsibility is rendered either through *yá'át'ééhgo*, meaning in a good way, orderly way (a general expression, also used in greetings), or through the expression *yaa'aháliya hódzidlí*, meaning being respectful (*yaa'aháliya*) and being wise or having a faithful thought on things and human beings (*hódzidlí*). It is clear neither of the typically strong Western notions of guilt and responsibility can be rendered in any comparable sense in Navajo: the connotations in Navajo moral attitudes are neatly differing from ours. This linguistic evidence might add to the general picture as drawn until now: guilt is not a regulator, while responsibility on the other hand is not stated in purely social or political terms (as tends to be the case in our society), but rather owes its meaning to the cognitive, epistemological frame of the Navajo knowledge (order in the universe). Both aspects once again stress the general characteristic of deep relatedness of Navajo morals to Navajo world view and natural philosophy: human culture (i.e. that of the Navajos themselves) is conceived of as but a parallel of human beings to and, their specific action through thought to define their place in the natural order.

The concept of risk is somewhat less selfevident, although the

constant reference to thought in foregoing paragraphs has shown the way. The active aspect of integrating of defining one's place in the Navajo universe is confined to specific procedures of 'going beyond' any temporary state or result of changes. Since everything is changing, nothing is still in the world (for Navajos), individuals constantly use their mental powers to go beyond any status quo they might have reached : the world is but changing phenomena, events, so any human being is bound to act accordingly if he is to be part of it. This, at least is our interpretation of the Navajo moral code, and, more in particular, of the beautiful general device that discloses fundamental wisdom for their moral life : *sq'ah naagháí bik'eh hózhóón*¹¹.

The expression is very difficult to render in a short and straightforward way : the fundamental status of the expression warrants against easy translations. The formula is used as a profound blessing for oneself or others and conveys a host of meanings and important distinctions of Navajo philosophy. We will only treat one : the expression can be translated as 'may (you, I) be strong and live to old age following the ways of beauty and harmony'¹². The expression is taken up, because it points towards this basic element of risk taking : nothing is definitely laid down from birth for the human being; instead he has to make his own way towards the optimal state (old age) and along the paths of the undefined criterion (beauty, etc.). The typical moral paradigm of Navajo we would like to stress is apparent here : you have to find your own way, knowing but vague constraints. The mental powers, the thought of the human being are the primary instruments that can be used to this goal. The aspect of 'going beyond' is exemplified clearly and irrefutably.

Specific, more outspoken forms of risk taking are encountered as well : gambling is not a disrespectful type of behaviour, since the money gained or lost through it is subject to the same use of mental powers as that resulting from other types of work. The thinker or philosopher is often likened to Coyote, that is, to the one, who messes up and/or goes beyond any provisional state of affairs and dares to wander two or three steps ahead of anybody else in his understanding and structuring of the natural order.

These expositions of material on Navajo morals, however incomplete they may be, should suffice to render the feeling of difference in comparison with our system, and to make clear what the relevance of natural philosophy and knowledge to moral behaviour may mean.

3.2.3. Politics.

Although, as remarked above, a lot of the original Navajo political ideas and institutions are difficult to retrieve and to judge appropriately by now, some aspects can still be observed in presumably original forms.

— leadership : a traditional leader, one is told, is someone who is inhabited by a special *ni'vch'i*, a special kind of spirit or mental principle. As such he is able to 'look into people's heart' to understand and be able to explicitly deal with particular problems in a way that is more powerful through its clarity and profoundness than most other people would be able to do. In a somewhat similar way medicine men and diviners have a special understanding of the natural order and can make their knowledge useful for other Navajos. The distinction between these 'leaders' and the 'common people' is absolute and rigid. This fact easily enables a nearly absolute power of these personalities on matters of public interest. The circumstances of life of the actual Navajo communities tends to soften the absoluteness of their power, since Navajos live in family units that are scattered all over the vast territory; but still a considerable amount of power must be invested in them. Typically, for our point of view, is the reference (again) to the specific relation with forces that organize the natural order and that are presupposed in anybody who is proclaimed a leader of some kind. In general, the ethnic consciousness, the fact of being a Navajo and living according to the Navajo ways and on the Navajo territory is a main political theme among members of the population.

— the family : women do have an important impact on local social and political regulations, partly because of the matrilinear and matrilocal system that is still generally respected, and partly (recently) because of the economic viability of women (through their sheep herding and, mainly, their rug weaving). In general, people live in close knit social units that are centered around the family relationships hooghan or broader settlement primarily (and most of the time exclusively) houses a family, with neighbours, — another family —, at distances that can cover several miles.

— gerontocracy : old people are held in esteem and usually still are the local or regional leaders of any community. Here, again, the reference is to the natural order : since they reached old age in a sane and well to do way, they are believed to have a better understanding of the natural order and the human way to comply with it.

— witchcraft : the fear for actions of witches is understood, in our model of the Navajo politics, as an important but secondary regulator of social structures. Typically, people who know a lot¹³,

people who own more than usual, and people who display other forms of relatively excessive behaviour are liable to be considered witches. The treatment against afflictions by such people reinstalls the person afflicted within the Navajo order, and expulses the presumably foreign or counter — order aspects from him. The situation can be understood by reference to the explanations on excess. In the same way, anybody who admits to be a witch almost automatically comes to suicide thereafter (at least in the reports we heard on it) : indeed, the selfaccusation of witchcraft in fact means one's admitting of being an enemy to the Navajos, of counteracting against the Navajo order and universe. By doing so, one is defined as a non-entity, a being that does not have a place within Creation anymore. A typical and strong example of the effectiveness of these beliefs in social life is given in the frontpage article of the Gallup Independent (a newspaper of a bordertown that is dominated by the Indian visitors and inhabitants) that relates on the impossibility to find Navajos for the job of prosecutor for the Tuba City court : appointed prosecutors quit the job, or even simply disappeared after a short time, because of three reasons, one of them being the fear to be 'witched' in this job.

4. General conclusions on the relationship of knowledge and morals; notes on a scientific study of moral phenomena.

The present paper wants to be a contribution to the study of moral aspects of a culture, with particular attention on the purely cognitive or knowledge involving nature of moral phenomena. The scope of the study did not permit a deep and exhaustive analysis of data within any particular culture, but it was attempted to learn from the partial analysis of Navajo moral peculiarities and regularities that indeed our own moral system might be studied with more effect when systematically taking into account these aspects of the knowledge system that are relevant for the proper understanding of the human being in his confrontation of the more basic questions of survival within a natural setting that is experienced as external, maybe even inimical to man. It should be kept in mind that the theological, resp. moral theoretic systems and statements of Navajos and Westerners alike were believed to be next to irrelevant. Rather, the natural philosophy, the theorizing on common sense experiential worlds were held to be highly significant with respect to moral phenomena. The latter are studied in some detail with the Navajos, while, it is an unfortunate circumstance for any interested student, they are practically unknown in the study of Western culture. There,

instead, second hand thoughts so to speak, the secondary elaborations of professional moralists within a tradition of professional moralist studies are abounding. The question is subjacent in this paper : does this tradition of theoretical studies by now produce any better insights into the moral phenomena in general, or in the moral world of the Westerner in particular ? The first question cannot be answered within the scope of this paper. The second question is implicitly answered with a negative, pleading for more thorough empirical, indeed genuinely anthropological investigations of the actual common sense knowledge of Westerners, and its clearly presumed relevance for the equally badly known actual moral behaviour of the Western subjects. The analysis of the relationship, and of the detailed and broadly argued evidence on both spheres of human activities available with the long and tenuous studies of so sophisticated and 'consistency-minded people as the Navajos is presented as an example of the fruitfulness and indeed necessity of this kind of approach. The degree of corroboration between epistemic and moral-political criteria and forms found there may not be relevant as such for the Western case. Still, the centrality of the relationship in the case of Navajo traditions is striking and invites readers to try and do a similar kind of research on their own culture, primarily, in our case, that of the Westerner.

A supplementary warning seems warranted here : it is not claimed in this paper that there should be any kind of causal or even any similarity relationships between philosophical-epistemic and moral-political notions and behaviours. Rather, the simple, nearly dialectical relationships of corroborating, of 'being fit for one another' (morals for cognitive aspects, and the other way around) is what strikes the present author. His is the feeling that something of this kind might be present in any culture, in order to enable some degree of meaningful living together, some way of avoiding total disfunctioning of any social unit and absolute idiosyncrasy (and, should we say, necessary psychopathology ?) of each of its members. The relation is essentially illdefined. The latter is a result of the scope of the present study that aims to get clear on some particular cultural patterns (in Navajo, and to a lesser degree in Western culture), and refrains from imposing precociously general rules, let alone laws of moral behaviour. Tremendous amounts of work remain to be done : it is the extrapolating claim of this paper that they should be done in the ways indicated also, if not exclusively.

Finally, it is precisely this particular credo that is meant to be

given with this paper : if moral phenomena can be studied, they should be studied scientifically. If they are studied scientifically, they should reach out for the most delicate and the deepest within any culture; and this deepest level of any particular culture is not this or that aspect of behaviour, knowledge, products, or what not, but precisely the intrinsic and culturally specific relationships between any of these 'domains' of cultural phenomena that any particular people will give form and emphasis in their specific and irrefutably brilliant way.

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NOTES

NOTES

¹The ethnographic material for this paper was gathered by Ingrid van Dooren and myself, during a field trip to the Navajo reservation, 1976-77. We acknowledge funding through a grant from Wenner Gren Foundation and a grant from the Council of Education, U.S. Government. Our gratitude to the Navajo people is hard to express in mere words. Furthermore, encouragement from O. Werner and J. Farella was a condition for perseverance.

²Typically, it is only after lengthy parts on Navajo world view and habits that Kluckhohn and Leighton (1947) explain the moral principles in the Navajo cultural community : all the while cognitive aspects are remembered to illustrate and comment on the moral aspects. A similar point of view was of course advocated by Whorf (1942).

³All material mentioned in this section is drawn from a detailed report of field experience, as recorded in Pinxten et al. (forthcoming). There also the different informants are listed who were kind enough to give information on these subjects.

⁴The description given by Whorf (1942) several years back, is quite accurate in this respect. Our field work can only confirm his insights here.

⁵For a detailed and very thorough analysis of this concept the reader is referred to the profound analysis in J. Farella (forthcoming).

⁶One consultant confided that he held that Deities had been on the earth at the moment of Creation, but had left this world ever since.

They may come back at the end of the present world.

⁷Recently, of course, some of the Navajo knowledge has been printed in books, which disrupts the traditional channels of distribution of knowledge. However, in the continuous negotiations on the purchase and use of this knowledge serious problems arise : Werner states in his interview on this point (forthcoming) that old people tend to recognize that knowledge will be lost unless it is recorded in this way. They usefully demand it will be printed in Navajo uniquely, not in English, knowing the language barrier is more than sufficient guarantee against its abuse by Whites.

⁸John Farella, who worked on Navajo morals told us about his findings concerning love : the positive feeling of love for somebody and the feeling of jealousy (experienced as negative, harmful) always go combined; you either have to take both, or leave it all. This is an instance of the same characteristic.

⁹This may help to explain why, as Navajos know very well themselves, treatments of 'mental illnesses' as perceived within the native knowledge system, through Navajo ceremonies is so effective, indeed in contrast (to a certain degree) to their experiences with Western psychiatrists.

¹⁰The statement led others to counter Haile on this point (e.g. Werner). This discussion is not at stake here : we only want to point to the Western habit of superimposing our native categories on other people's answers to fundamental questions.

¹¹Again, the interested reader should be referred to John Farella's work on Navajos that takes this expression in particular as a core formula of Navajo morals.

¹²The expression is subject to debates, and its meaning is still not fully understood by Western scholars, as is explained elsewhere (Pinxten, et al., forthcoming).

¹³Consistently, white people seldom if ever will become witches, because of the simple fact that, being a non-Navajo, "they lack essential parts of knowledge". Since they lack knowledge, they cannot abuse it either.

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