Dealing with the Cause of COVID-19: Indigenous spirituality and worldview as an alternative approach in thinking about this pandemic

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Abstract: In the battle against COVID-19, a neglected but extremely knowledgeable voice is that of Indigenous or indigenising religions. These groups have both biological and spiritual insight that could contribute to the discussion around resiliency, behaviour adaptation and contributory environmental concerns.

The current crisis can be considered from various perspectives, including economic, political or ecological justice. In what follows, we will consider it from a causal perspective since this is the perspective best addressed from an Indigenous worldview and is the aspect most important to those who hold Indigenous or indigenising values. Additionally, there are warnings that this virus is not a unique situation, and if we do not address the root causes then we will be facing other pandemics in the future.

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COVID-19 was not unpredictable. It is the third outbreak of coronavirus in 20 years. Worldwide more and more animals are kept together in either unsanitary or overly hygienic (antibiotics, etc.) conditions in order to satisfy the rising demand for animal protein. Further, the need for space and raw materials is perpetuating encroachment on animal habitats such as rainforests, which in turn brings more humans in contact with more exotic animal species. Add to that frequent international travel—both human and animal—which enables the conditions for zoonosis.

Scientists tell us that COVID-19 originated in wet markets in China. This has been contested by those involved with the wet markets, but the consensus is that wet markets, in which many different species of animal are kept in close proximity, is where this coronavirus originated. In wet markets, live animals are caged next to butchered animals. Wildlife that has not been traditionally added into the human diet is sold for consumption. Wild animals are also caged and held within the same area as live domesticated animals. Additionally, bats house within the buildings where the wet markets are held and roam free. Raw meat is not always refrigerated, and humans walk through all of this.

It is understood that these close quarters led to the virus 'jumping' from the animal species over to the human species. There are theories that the bats living in the wet market buildings have played a part as carriers since they have a higher metabolism, which allowed the virus to develop within this species without it killing the bats first. While the virus did not jump directly from bats to humans, it is considered that it jumped to the animals caged within the wet markets who then transmitted the virus to a human host.

Before the virus impacted humans, the conditions in the wet markets were known by those in the global health industry and among a few others—certainly among tourists to China—but they only became a problem once the human species became infected. Then the ethical issues around wet markets began to be questioned. However, these questions moved quickly to human concerns and animal treatment was a secondary consideration, important only because it made a difference to human health. The initial discussion around COVID-19 briefly skimmed over the causes and rapidly began to address human ethical questions such as the morality of self-isolation, mask wearing and visitation to individuals such as the elderly. Ethical considerations such as treatment of animals or food choices have not really received a widespread hearing.

For those aware of Indigenous/indigenizing ethics, this fact highlights the difference Indigenous knowledge brings to the table. If Indigenous knowledge was a common discussion partner within our ethical thought, wet markets would not be an accepted practice, regardless of whether humans became infected by COVID-19. This highlights how difference of perspective plays an important role in ethical formation. However, it is important not to only argue over whether one ethic is better than another (a Western approach); the pragmatic results of held ethics (an Indigenous/ indigenising approach) is also an important consideration.

Values: What Indigenous groups' ethics can bring to the solution of the pandemic

Granted, Indigenous knowledge is ancient. However, this does not mean it is static nor should being ancient preclude its value to knowledge acquisition. Universities teach Roman and Greek philosophy which is also ancient, but is usually not condemned as romantic or out of touch in some other way. This discrepancy should help us to become aware of the biases that we may still carry from the colonial era which no longer serve us in our current environment. Furthermore, an awareness of our biases will hopefully remove—or at least make us aware of—those barriers we may unconsciously have erected as we look further at Indigenous ethics.

For those aware of Indigenous values, the most obvious ethic that is apparent in considering the COVID-19 virus is that of **kinship**. Kinship is not only an Indigenous term since most cultures have an idea of kinship. However, within Indigenous knowledge, kinship is deeper than human interactions. Indigenous knowledge does not have such a definitive border between human and non-human nature as Western thought, and therefore kinship embraces non-human beings as kin as well. There is a strong understanding that animals are relatives, and some branches of Indigenous knowledge include flora as kin. Terms such as 'brother', 'cousin', 'grandmother' or 'sister' are often used, with the most familiar being 'Mother' Nature. It is important to recognise that the latter is a serious term for Indigenous knowledge; the Earth is considered to be our mother. As John Mohawk explains:

> The Mother Earth is a spirit. She is an energy force that shows itself to us in matter, and we call this matter Earth.

This mindset of kinship enables humans to enlarge their ethical thinking to treat non-humans with the same ethics that they treat humans. Respect and care for Mother Earth is not a side thought or a pragmatic consideration valued only as a tool for human flourishing; rather, it is an extension of what it means to be a good and moral person. Thus, a moral person practises Earth care in the same manner as moral Western humans practise care for their human mother. In fact, within some Indigenous thought processes one cannot be moral unless one has good morals when it comes to treatment of the non-human world.

Within Indigenous thought the idea of caging wildlife in the wet markets would be unacceptable. Not only for those who are caging the animals, but also for the consumers who are buying the product. Additionally, caging live animals in small cages next to their natural enemies would be a violation of natural law. Even caging domesticated animals in such a small space would be rejected because this behaviour does not show respect or kindness towards one's kin. Leaving animals in a space to watch other animals being butchered would also be considered immoral. Just as we would not do that to our children, we should not do that to other kin. Thus, Indigenous thought naturally prohibits the treatment

that animals receive in wet markets, and this has the pragmatic result of also protecting humans from viral diseases.

At this point, discussion can become ridiculous and farfetched. Many then proclaim that if all life is kin, then human life can no longer continue because we would not be able to eat or use products. This claim has no basis in Indigenous thought. There is an understanding within Indigenous/indigenising thought that dictates and determines the ethics of food choices whether they are animal or vegetable. There is a serious and sombre understanding that life is a circle, and that there is a natural order to it. It is understood that within this circle of life, each being has a part to play, and flora and fauna play a part in providing for human life to continue. Just as decay of wild animal bodies—or even human bodies—plays a part in fertilising soil that then provides plants as food for other wild animals.

Indigenous thought understands the circle of life probably better than any other form of thought due to their constant observation of the natural world. It is this knowledge that leads to a second ethic. That ethic is **to take only what is needed and to use all that is taken**. From ancient time until now, all parts of what is taken was saved if its use was not immediate. When subsistence hunting was the source of food products, little to nothing was thrown away. Besides providing meat, the skin was used for clothing; sinew was used for sewing; and bone was used for cooking or storage. They knew what taking an animal life entails since they hunted and butchered the animal themselves, or they gathered fruits and vegetables directly from the plant. This intimate knowledge and work made the event unique and led to understanding of the gifts as sacred. It is this sacredness that brought the understanding that nothing should be discarded. Even today in Eskimo cultures in Alaska, the oil from seal hunting is used both as a food item and as a source for lighting.

Today, food items can often be obtained without hunting, nonetheless the same ethic applies: not too much and nothing wasted. This means that the idea of a plateful of steak would be an immoral choice. No human needs a plate of steak—regardless of how many steak restaurants would convince us otherwise. Food is also thought of as medicine in Indigenous thought and so an overwhelming choice of one food item over another would not be a moral choice. A variety of food that builds the body and spirit would be the choice, and for this reason much thought is given to local food items and horticulture. Applying this consideration in relation to the wet markets, or even our own European and North American livestock living conditions, means that there would be a reduction in the purchase of meat as well as a demand for respectful conditions for any meat production. When the production of meat becomes a sacred event rather than only a commercial enterprise, care and reverence would be a natural outcome.This idea of food as medicine paired with the understanding that all life is put on Earth to support life is included in many Indigenous festivals and rituals. The animal who gives its life to the people to feed and clothe them is honoured. Thanks are given to the animal who gives to the people. This mindset of gratitude builds respect and provides a barrier to overconsumption or

carelessness. Not to ensure that there is more for humans later—a pragmatic result—but because of a spirit of humility and thankfulness for the gifts of Mother Earth and the beings on Earth.

This mindset of gratitude and caution in taking provides a spiritual aspect to the Indigenous approach to the world that differs from simple sustainability. Sustainability understands the world as ready to be used and conservation is necessary to be available to humans. For most sustainability is not a spiritual value, although for those who have an Earth-based spirituality it is often a practice within their spirituality. Indigenous worldview says that the world is sacred and must be approached as that which is holy simply for its sake and not for the sake of humans. The pragmatic result is the same—sustainability occurs, but has a more intrinsic motivation than sustainability for future human use.

The thought of future use is not missing in Indigenous thought, however. A third ethic that we will address is the idea of **seventh generation thinking**. For those who have a hard time wrapping their minds around kinship, seventh generation thinking is a good starting point. Simply stated, the ethic of the seventh generation means that one must think about the impact that their actions have on their sixth great grandchild. If the impact is good, then the action is good. If the impact is harmful, then the action is wrong.

To be honest, this is a difficult ethic since it is not always easy to consider what our impact will be in seven generations. It is similar to the Western utilitarian ethic which considers the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Trying to decide this is always a longshot and carries many exceptions and influences that may not be foreseen. Additionally, when we consider the technological jumps that have been made within the last seven generations, one may scratch their head as they try to consider what may lie in our grandchildren's futures. However, the theory of the seventh generation is not as convoluted as utilitarianism can become. The teaching is meant to encourage people to adopt long- rather than short-term thinking and to think about what they would want for their own family rather than becoming unattached from their actions due to their own mortality. It may be impossible to know what the future will hold, but we can consider if we want to drive or ride our bicycle when we think about our grandchildren's future and climate change. Likewise, knowing that wet markets may create a virus that challenges our grandchild's very existence makes us aware of today's food purchases. Purchasing compassionately-raised meat—and limiting ourselves in how much we purchase—or paying for biodiverse products becomes less of an economic burden and more of a loving gesture for our offspring. In this model, sustainability is not about a cold market calculation of long-term supply and use—which does nothing to motivate an individual's ethical behaviour—but rather, becomes a question of love for our kin and a support of life-nourishing behaviours. John Mohawk explains this ethic as a spiritual directive in addition to an internalised love for our offspring. He writes that:

> It is the Creator's way that all are taught to direct their energies toward the well-being of the unborn generations.

Future considerations
We are left with the question, then, of whether Western culture can hear and work with Indigenous thought structures. If we believe the scientists of our universities, our patterns of thought and behaviour have brought us into grave danger. The question should not be whether we can do it, but rather can we risk not learning from Indigenous/indigenising knowledge?
There are countries that are attempting to merge the two thought cultures. Ecuador was the first country to write the rights of Nature into its constitution—largely due to the work of her Indigenous communities. Now that law recognises nature as a rights holder, Western thought is required to work with Indigenous thought to pave a way towards the future. According to Hugo Echeverria, an environmental attorney, this means Ecuador is paving the way to build constitutional law that incorporates all rights holders and will impact how society develops in this area.

Even though Christopher Stone, also an attorney, called for rights for nature in his 1972 article entitled 'Should Trees Have Standing', it has taken years for this to be incorporated into a legal system. Its passage is due to the work and advocacy of the Indigenous communities in Ecuador based on their spiritual, rather than instrumental, approach to all of life.
Other communities and countries are following in that many are beginning to hear and understand what their Indigenous communities are arguing. Canada, for example, has recently begun to incorporate Indigenous thought into their policy making, although they are not yet as progressive as Ecuador by writing it into their constitution. Moreover, the battle on fossil fuel extraction is an ongoing sore spot between Indigenous communities and the Canadian government. Still the recognition of another form of knowledge creation is encouraging.

Conclusion
We have attempted to introduce Indigenous/indigenising spirituality and worldview as an alternative approach to thinking about the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than addressing the resulting symptoms of disease to the virus, we have argued that a different approach to the causes is necessary. Since the system of ethics in Western thought is largely anthropocentric and therefore not as useful in addressing biological situations, we introduced three Indigenous ethics that address the known causes of COVID-19.
Combating the idea that the Indigenous/indigenising worldview is too romantic for a postmodern world, we introduced two nations whose policies are currently incorporating Indigenous thought. One has included rights of nature—a result of held kinship ethics and morality—into its constitution. This indicates that Indigenous thought is a valid system for our contemporary problems and lived experiences.
As a final note, it is important that we dialogue with Indigenous people to learn how their knowledge can help us in the COVID-19 pandemic, but more so, that

we learn so we can strategically recognise those practices that endanger life and, in doing so, prevent further pandemics. From the above argumentation it could be assumed that a beginning point is greater respect for nature which would include moving away from industrial livestock farming, deforestation, wet markets, etc. While not covered in this post, these actions would also help address climate change, which has and will bring its own detrimental impact on living beings, including humans.