

Five Branches of Hodinohso:ni/Rotinonshyonni Philosophy

Cultural Underpinnings of the Indigenous Knowledge Centre

December 2009

I) Overview

Hodinohso:ni/Rotinonshyonni Philosophy is like a tree. It has deep roots (the past), it flowers above ground (the present) and produces seeds (the future). Its branches hold the knowledge of countless generations from which we can draw comfort and shade.

The Tree of Hodinohso:ni/Rotinonshyonni Philosophy has five branches which address the following questions:

Metaphysics - What's out there? - Study of *Existence* and the nature of existence, including our spiritual understandings.

Epistemology - How do I know about it? - Study of *Knowledge* and how we know about reality and existence.

Ethics - What should I do? - Study of *Action* because it is impossible to make proper choices without knowledge.

Politics - What actions are permissible? - Study of *Social Force* and how people should act in a proper society and what is considered proper conduct.

Aesthetics - What can life be like? - Study of *Arts* and sense of life using language, song, dance, and visual culture to create a sense of place and destiny.

II) Details

1) Hodinohso:ni/Rotinonshyonni Metaphysics What's out there?

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy responsible for the study of *existence*. It is the foundation of a *worldview* – the fundamental view of the world around us. It answers the question "What is?" It encompasses everything that exists, as well as the nature of existence itself. Metaphysics is the philosophy of what is real and what is not.

For the Hodinohso:ni/Rotinonshyonni, our worldview comes from the **Creation Story**, the **Original Instructions** and is expressed in our **Annual Cycle of Ceremonies of Thanksgiving**. These things give us a sense of the universe and how it functions. It also

creates and maintains both personal and spiritual relationships with all of the forces within that universe.

Our worldview teaches us that we exist on purpose, with a sacred intent and a duty to uphold the human responsibility to nature. It teaches us that there are several realms to our universe, unseen forces at work, and that a parallel worlds exists which can sometimes be visited by humans.

2) Hodinohso:ni/Rotinoḥsyonni Epistemology: How do I know about it?

Epistemology is the study of our method of *acquiring knowledge*. It answers the question, "How do we know?" It encompasses the nature of *concepts*, the *validity* of the senses, *logical reasoning*, as well as *thoughts, ideas, memories, emotions*, and all things mental. It is concerned with how our minds are related to perceived reality, and whether these relationships are valid or invalid.

Hodinohso:ni/Rotinoḥsyonni epistemology encompasses, inherent knowledge (that born within); cultural legacy (that shared through story, ceremony and philosophy); insightful experiences (that shared through dreams, visions, and communication with spirits); and that acquired by pragmatic experiences on the land (life skills). The Hodinohso:ni/Rotinoḥsyonni concept of the **Good Mind** is another example of our epistemology. Our minds are connected to the mind of the Creator (and some knowledge is inherent in that connection) and it is also connected to our ancestors (other knowledge is inherited through our cellular memory).

Hodinohso:ni/Rotinoḥsyonni epistemology is based upon the relationships we have with nature. Knowledge and understanding come from the Mother Earth, and is proven valid by the way in which it functions. The Earth is our model, our teacher. We *ōreadö* nature and it reveals itself to us as we experience the land and the cosmos. We *ōsenseö* the **righteousness** of the process, and we **respect** the path that has been laid out for us by the Creator. At the same time, we were given a mind with the capacity for rational thinking so the logic of the Creation can be applied to any situation that arises.

3) Hodinohso:ni/Rotinoḥsyonni Ethics: What should I do?

Ethics is the branch of study dealing with what is the *proper course of action* for humans within the society. It answers the question, "What do I do?" It is the study of *right* and *wrong* in human endeavors. At a more fundamental level, it is the method by which we categorize our *values* and pursue them. Do we pursue our own happiness, or do we sacrifice ourselves to a greater cause?

Hodinohso:ni/Rotinoḥsyonni ethics promote essential values that will help one make decisions that advance those values. The values are the **state of peacefulness**, the proper **respect to maintain peace**, and the **friendship/trust/respect** needed between all things for respect to prevail.

Sken:nen, *Kanikonri:io* and *Kahsahstenhsera* are Hodinohso:ni/Rotinoonhsyonni ethics.

Sken:nen (peace) is more than just the absence of conflict or war; it has spiritual, social and political foundations. *Sken:nen* is the active striving of humans for the purpose of establishing universal justice and is the product of a unified people on the path of righteousness and reason. That represents the ability to enact the principles of peace through education, public opinion and political unity. It is the product of a spiritually conscious society using its rational abilities.

When we work for *sken:nen*, we develop a *kanikonri:io* (Good Mind), or a good way (righteous) of thinking. *Kanikonri:io* means that people using their purest and most unselfish minds will achieve great thoughts, words and actions. It occurs when people put their minds and emotions in harmony with the flow of the universe and the intentions of the Creator. The principle of this righteousness demands that all thoughts of prejudice, privilege or superiority be swept away and that recognition be given to the reality that creation is intended for the benefit of all beings equally. *Reason* is seen as the skill that humans are born with, but must be exercised to keep the Good Mind vital and functional.

When we work for *sken:nen* and *kanikonri:io*, we develop *kahsahstenhsera* (strength) which flows from the power of the Good Mind to use rational thinking and persuasion to channel the inherent good will of humans to work toward peace, a Good Mind and unity to prevent the abuse of human beings and Mother Earth.

4) Hodinohso:ni/Rotinoonhsyonni Politics: What actions are permissible?

Politics is *ethics applied* to a group of people. It is *social relations* involving *authority* or *power*. It is also the process by which groups of people *make decisions* and part of a Haudenosaunee civics - study of rights and duties of citizenship.

Our Chiefs are asked to consider the impact of their decisions upon **maintaining the Great Peace**, upon the **integrity of nature** and the impact their decisions will have on the **welfare of the future generations** to come. This is called the Great Goodness because it results from people using the Good Mind (fairness) to unite their thinking and actions in order to be strong in acting honorably and peacefully.

Equality and fairness are principle values of Hodinohso:ni/Rotinoonhsyonni politics. It recognizes that all humans have an equal voice. People are to be treated fairly, not judged harshly or with malice. This is why **consensus** is the preferred way of making decisions, as the leaders have to come to one mind on matter, thereby all taking responsibility for the decision. People have to agree with the matters so that there is no need for police, judges and jailers. *Coming to one mind* on a matter is a cultural frame of reference.

The Great Law is not a coercive law, to be enforced against the will of the people. Instead, it is a law that requires the respect of people who **willingly submit themselves** to the use of the **Good Mind** (justice), **peace** (good relationships) and **united strength** (to co-exist productively).

The experiences of Hyenwatha, Jikonsase, the Cannibal and Todadaho from the era of the formation of the Great Law are examples of the power of transformation to the proper way of being:

* Hyenwatha had his debilitating grief over the loss of his daughters lifted upon deep contemplation, combined with the power of wampum and the words of Condolence. In order to advocate for peace, he had to be at peace over his losses. His mind, heart and spirit had to be uplifted.

* Jikonsase had her duplicitous nature replaced by kindness. She had to change her beliefs and habits in order to be more reflective of the Good Mind. She had to stop enabling the warriors on their path of destruction, and instead, become a female leader who watches over the men to make sure that they keep the Great Peace.

* The Cannibal had to change his eating habits! It was the power of the Good Mind that enabled him to see the wrongness of his previous conduct, and gave him the strength to change his disgusting habits and become an advocate for life. He used the power of reason to rethink what he was doing, and upon reflection, chose a better path.

* Todadaho had his twisted mind healed and replaced with the Good Mind. His mind was so clouded with evil thoughts that his body was also deformed and his spirituality was bankrupt. The Peacemaker and the other leaders put their minds together to transform Todadaho and make him a part of the solution.

The ethical values to be applied in these cases include:

Creation Values ó Be thankful for what has been provided; Be good to one another ó treat each other as family; Remember the Creation ó tell the stories to the children so they will learn to understand why the world works the way it does; Understand the forces of the universe; This world is a reflection of the Sky World; and We are all sacred beings.

Original Instruction Values ó Take Care of yourself and others; Use herbal medicines; Attend the ceremonies; Plant the Three Sisters; Share work; Use the clans; and Keep a good relationship with nature.

Great Law Values ó Use the Good Mind; Promote peacefulness; Use reason over violence; Use the clans; Condole each others losses; Lift the minds and spirits of the people; Believe in Peace (Unity from Consensus, Non-Violent Problem-solving and Equality); Share your Strength (Power ó Healthiness, and Good Relationships); and Keep the Good Mind (Righteousness ó Fairness, Kindness, and Helpfulness)

Gaiwiio Values ó Use clear, sober thinking; Stop domestic violence; Take care of your home and family; Return to gardening; Attend the ceremonies; understand actions have consequences; Prepare for changes; Decolonize and return to Our way of Life.

5) Hodinohso:ni/Rotinoḥsyonni Aesthetics: What can life be like?

Aesthetics is the *study of art*. It includes *what art consists of*, as well as the *purpose behind it*. What makes something beautiful? It also studies *methods of evaluating art*, and allows *judgments of the art*. Is art in the eye of the beholder? Does anything that appeals to you fit under the umbrella of art? Or does it have a specific nature? Does it accomplish a goal?

Hodinohso:ni/Rotinoḥsyonni aesthetics of the past exhibit a **state of harmony**, of **interconnectedness**, more than simple visual pleasure. Things were made to be a reflection of relationships advocated for in the teachings. The designs on an object were thought to enhance the use of that object.

Hodinohso:ni/Rotinoḥsyonni aesthetics include a **sense of design, patterns, colors and metaphors** that are meaningful, and reflected in our languages, songs, dance, clothing, utensils, longhouse architecture, and the way in which we exist in the world in a good way.

Cultural metaphors, such as the Great Turtle Island, Mother Earth, Dish With One Spoon, and the Tree of Peace, give people a way to visualize their culture. Visual art not only speaks of what was important, but also what can still be relevant in the future. In this way Hodinohso:ni/Rotinoḥsyonni culture is forward looking. Art becomes the way in which we communicate across time, connecting the past, present and future.