

**HUSEK (THE WILL):  
A WICHÍ CATEGORY OF THE PERSON**

**JOHN PALMER**

AMONG Andrew Duff-Cooper's many interests, metaphysics was one on which he wrote with his characteristic clarity and profundity (see, for example, Duff-Cooper 1985, 1987). I am very pleased, therefore, to be able to publish this essay on a theme of metaphysics in this issue dedicated to his memory. Andrew kindly read and commented extensively on a first draft of the essay while he was doing his doctoral field research in 1981, and his perceptive and encouraging remarks at the time have helped to bring it, after all these years, to its present state.

The material presented in this essay is based principally on my field research among the Wichí in 1976 and 1978-9. For their generous assistance in bringing the essay into being, I am very grateful to the many Wichí—in particular, Yilis—with whom I discussed its subject. I am also grateful to the Department of Education and Science, to Exeter College, Oxford, and to the Spalding Trust for financial support, and to Jeremy Coote, Barry Cottrell, Jeremy MacClancy, David Napier, Rodney Needham and Peter Rivière for their comments on earlier drafts. For further information on the Wichí, see the works listed in the bibliography in Alvarsson 1988. The phonetic system I have used to transliterate the Wichí language includes the following features: *j* as in Spanish *ojo*, *thl* as in Welsh *ll*, *q* as in a guttural *k*. An apostrophe after a consonant indicates a glottal stop, a tilde over a vowel or the letter *y* indicates nasalization, a diaeresis over the second of two vowels indicates that it is pronounced separately.

*Introduction*

The Wichí of the northern Argentine Chaco have a dualist conception of the person as comprising both a body (*t'isan*) and a will (*husek*).<sup>1</sup> Although ordinarily invisible, the will, like other metaphysical phenomena in the Wichí cosmos, is not absolutely imperceptible, but only 'difficult' (*atá*) to see. Being immaterial entities whose true dimension is esoteric reality, human wills are visible—as human beings—in dreams (of which all Wichí have experience) and in shamanic healing, the Wichí's two means of access to esoteric reality.

In Wichí thought, the will is an indispensable organ of the body, located in the heart, of which it is the metaphysical counterpart. Just as the heart is recognized by Wichí as the material vital factor in human life, they regard the will as the *immaterial* vital factor: the body, although a living organism in its own right, cannot maintain itself in an operative condition without a will. We might say that a body without a will is like a car without a driver.

Besides this explicit physiological function, the Wichí will also has an implicit sociological role. It maintains order in the individual not only as a physical being, but also as a social person, such that presence of will (*husek ihi*) is as important for the well-being of the social group as it is for physical health. These two aspects of the Wichí will—the (innate) physiological and the (acquired) social—correspond to our concepts of the 'will to be' and 'goodwill' respectively. For the purposes of the analysis, and at the risk of overformalizing, it is useful to distinguish between them as an individual (or physiological) will and a social (or moral) will.

In the same way that, as a physiological category, the Wichí will is beneficial, so too in its social role it is defined as intrinsically good. For the Wichí the notion of a bad will is a contradiction in terms: ill will among the Wichí is simply absence of will (*husek ihi-hit'a* or *husek ta néyehi*). In contrast to the English equivalent, which has negative connotations as the source of obdurate or domineering individualism, the Wichí will is construed as the socializing factor in the individual. It is taken to be the controlling influence on natural individualism, which for the Wichí is the denial of human society.

1. Hunt (1937: 28) translates *husek* as 'soul, spirit, mind, angel' and, under a separate entry, 'intelligence'. Hunt's uncertainty about the meaning of the word is one reason why an alternative has been settled upon here. More specifically, 'angel' has not been adopted because it is too detached from human experience; and 'mind' and 'intelligence' reduce the will to the faculty of cognition, of which, according to Wichí precepts, the will is independent. The term 'spirit' is used here as a generic term for a variety of metaphysical phenomena, of which a person's *husek* is but one. 'Soul' is an obscure concept, on account of its divergent uses in different contexts; however, in order to respect the Wichí convention of redesignating the *husek* after death—when it becomes an *ahat*—the term 'soul' has been retained and applied to this posthumous form (as in 'soul of the dead'). Whether or not the *husek* as it exists in life is adequately glossed as 'the will' depends on the usefulness of this term as an exegetical tool. This essay is, in one sense, an experiment to test its usefulness as such.

The constitutional importance of the Wichí will is implicit in their definition of it as the ‘centre’ of the individual. (Analogously, Wichí identify the headman (*niyat*) as the ‘centre’ of the community, both politically and spatially.) The will is the point to which all the physical and moral parts of the whole relate; it is the active principle underlying the unity and order of the person, both as a physical body and as a member of the social body. For the Wichí, the will is what turns human bodies into ‘human beings’ (*wichí*).

Using one example for each of its two aspects—the physiological and the social—I aim in this essay to illustrate the will’s centrality in respect of the two corresponding facets of Wichí personhood: individuality and sociality, or personal existence and the socialized ego, respectively. To the extent that the Wichí will underscores both these facets of personhood, it constitutes the interface between the individual and society.

### *Fear, Loss of Will, and Infirmary*

Being an immaterial entity, the will’s relationship with matter—the corporeal body that is its ‘container’ (*lehí*)—is unstable. Out of place in the world of forms, the will has a propensity to vacate the case in which it is confined and return to its natural, metaphysical dimension (esoteric reality). Outside a shamanic context, the disjunction of will and body signifies potential disorder.

Dreaming is a more or less quotidian instance of will-departure: while the body sleeps, the will leaves (*t’isan imá, wet yik lehusek*). Provided that the dream is not inauspicious—i.e. nothing fearful occurs and the will has a safe journey—the will’s separation from the body in such cases has no ill effects. The will reunites with the body, which then awakes, none the worse for its temporary desertion. However, the danger in dreams is that while the will is out and about (*iche-tso*) it might see something intimidating—i.e. something it does not recognize or recognizes to be nefarious. The will then will be shocked (*iseltej*) or afraid (*nowaye*) and, as a result, the body of the dreamer will suffer—because, for the Wichí, fear is pathogenic.

Moments of fear are the other main occasion, besides dreams, when the Wichí’s (physiological) will absconds. Characteristically timorous, the will is predisposed to flee in the face of danger. When it does so, this entails a radical severing of the will from the body and its permanent alienation, unless it is retrieved by a *hiyawu* (seer). Loss of will through fear, as distinct from during (auspicious) dreams, is harmful to the body, making it vulnerable to pathogenic agencies (*ōcha tothlo*). In short, fear facilitates illness.

Before looking at the consequences of fear, it will help to give a brief account of its causes. Fear can be inspired by anything that is *hōchai*, ‘ghastly’, to the perceiver. Wichí apply the term ‘ghastly’ to (among others) four categories of

phenomena. The first of these is the savagely aggressive (*fwitsaj*), epitomized by the jaguar. Second is the metaphysical–spiritual apparitions which, being the inverse of human beings, are generally encountered in isolation from human society, either at night or in dreams, or in the ‘centre of the forest’ (*tah̄yi chowej*) or in the ‘middle of the path’ (*nayij chowej*) (i.e. at the greatest conceptual distance from the cultural space of a village). A typical case is that of a Wichí who loses his way (*wetá*) and meets Tah̄yi Wuk, the forest god. Contact with a spiritual being is invariably frightening to non-specialists (i.e. Wichí who are unacquainted (*itajwelniyejta*) with such beings). For the specialist metaphysician, the *hiyawu*, it is an unavoidable occupational hazard that must be confronted squarely, because the only successful way to carry through dealings with the spirit world is by overcoming the fear that such dealings normally arouse.

The third category of the ‘ghastly’ is the anomalous, for example an uncorrupted corpse. If a person dies away from home during a period of seasonal migration, his body is given a temporary burial in the forest. It is later exhumed for interment in the village burial ground. Wichí know of cases where the corpse has been found intact (*imathliwek*) when exhumed (cf. Peramás 1868: 216)—a departure from the ordinary laws of nature that they regard as a ‘ghastly’ mystery.<sup>2</sup>

The final category is the aesthetically alarming. An example might be the sound of a violent thunderclap in the village clearing amid the still of the forest (to guard against which the mother of an infant covers the child’s ears with her hands during a turbulent rainstorm). Another example, from the perspective of a prepubescent girl, might be the sight of pubic hair: as one young Wichí girl said to her ‘elder sister’ (MZD), ‘you [are] ghastly; you [have] vagina-hair’ (*a hōchai, a su-wole*).

Besides being stimulated by external factors, fear is also correlated by Wichí with the subject’s own physiology, in that they understand it to be a consequence of ‘faint-heartedness’ (*t’otle t’un-hit’a*). A Wichí with a firm heart (*t’otle t’un*) is protected against fear, because a firm heart prevents the will’s escape: in other words, it pre-empts the main effect of fear (loss of will). When a Wichí has to brave a crisis, he is urged to harden his heart (*t’unhat’ otle*)—i.e. to have courage and so resist the will-depriving consequences of fear.<sup>3</sup>

2. It is conceivable that a corpse could be preserved in the desiccated soil conditions that exist during the long dry season (April–October), the time when forest communities disperse.

3. For expository reasons, the following analysis is written in the masculine gender. However, except where gender-specific categories are mentioned explicitly (‘headman’, ‘husband’, ‘father’, ‘daughter’ etc.), the feminine gender can be substituted without any difficulty. Thus, where the point of reference is a ‘Wichí’, ‘person’, ‘séer’, ‘patient’, ‘victim’ or ‘ego’, ‘he/him/his’ can equally well be read as ‘she/her/her(s)’. There is no qualitative difference in the Wichí mind between the wills of men and women—apart from the fact that after death the wills of men and women retain male and female identities.

Wichí identify the initial effect of loss of will through fear as a psychosomatic disorder whose symptoms are a change of heartbeat, a sensation of coldness, weak speech, and mental alertness (*yik haati*, 'sleep goes'). Normal physiological processes are thus modified, but not pathologically impaired. Will-loss does, however, admit of degree, relative to the causal agency's capacity to expel—and incapacitate—the subject's will. In particularly acute cases, loss of will may result in the victim fainting, i.e. succumbing to a condition described by Wichí as being both 'like death' (*māt chi yithl*) and 'on the verge of death' (*tot'aye chik ileyej hohnat*). However, this morbid state is transitory and the victim typically recovers 'as though there were nothing wrong with him' (*māt chi tik lecha ihì*). The important point for the present purpose is that loss of will is not in itself a direct and immediate cause of death: a will-less body continues—temporarily—to function under its own momentum.

It is more the chronic concomitants of will-loss that make it a pathogenic disorder. Wichí hold that a person who loses his will is left in a defenceless state that predisposes him to infirmity—meaning, in our medical terms, that his immune system collapses. In ethnomedical terms, a person without his will is an empty shell, a walking skin (*tajthlame t'oj ta ichajthli*, 'he bears only his skin'). The void inside this deserted frame is open to invasion by a (metaphysical) foreign body (cf. Napier 1993). This intrusive element is typically a dart fired into the victim by a predatory illness-spirit, which can see the recess left by the absent will and has no hesitation—or difficulty—in occupying it. As Wichí succinctly express it: 'if I am missing my will and a pain [illness-spirit] arrives, it invades my will's place' (*ta tai ohusek, wet, chi nam aitaj, tiyajo ohusek lewet*). In short, absence of will presupposes presence of ailment. And since 'pains' and their weapons are 'hot', the victim's heart (the place of his will) is burnt (*chayo aitaj, ip'ot'otle*)—in other words, his source of physical vitality is destroyed.

The victim is unaware that he has lost his will. He is conscious, though, that he is physically indisposed and therefore 'approaches a seer' (*thla-chute hiyawu*). The seer diagnoses the patient's condition (he can detect a will's absence by scanning the body, which is transparent to his sight) and then performs the dual operation of extracting the alien pathogen and restoring the dislodged will. In order to do the latter, he has first to locate and retrieve the will. He therefore releases his own will into the cosmos in order to discover which god, spirit, or celestial body has abducted his patient's essential part. Having ascertained this, the seer's will rescues his patient's will or negotiates with its captor(s) for its release in exchange for a ransom. The hostage will has the form of an infant. After gaining possession of it—and after healing it if it has been injured by its captor(s)—the seer's will (either in the form of the seer himself or, if it has to fly, as a bird) carries this defenceless and harmless being back to the patient, at whose side the body of the seer has meanwhile been chanting.

Once his own will has, as it were, docked, the seer exposes the rescued will to view. Under the influence of his breath and spittle, it materializes in the palm of his hand in the form of a firefly (a natural symbol of the will's luminosity (see

below)). This the seer then reincorporates in the patient's body: by blowing both on the (entomomorphic) will and on the patient's chest, he causes the will to re-enter the chest. In effect, it is willed—in Wichí terms, 'charmed'—back into place. With this rehabilitation of the will, the ailing (dis-spirited) body will be revived.

None the less, fear as a cause of will-loss is not an altogether detrimental emotion. In a controlled context it can be a positive experience. First, Wichí share the view that it is human to fear (cf. Howell 1989) and that, conversely, to be impervious to the emotion is to lack the organ in which the emotion is located (the will). (It is important to distinguish between the involuntary fearlessness that is a deficiency in 'real people' (*hānlūq wichí*) and the voluntary courage required of Wichí seers in order for them to face the terrors of esoteric reality.) A second sense in which the controlled use of fear can be of value is that it can enhance presence of the social will in an individual. If a child misbehaves—that is to say, behaves in an unsocialized manner—the parents or adult kin may shock (*istun*) the child (i.e. cause it to feel fear) in order to make it aware of what is unacceptable behaviour. This process of socialization is what Wichí call will-induction (*hantlhusek-ej*, to 'know will'): it induces in the child the social will (moral sense, or goodwill), which is an integral part of the child's learning to become a socially responsible adult. Loss of (individual) will thus conduces to the acquisition of (social) will.

It is time, then, to address the question of the Wichí's social will—henceforth, for the sake of clarity, to be referred to as 'goodwill'.

### *The Will and Morality*

#### (a) Presence of will

Consciousness, or the thoughts experienced by Wichí as occurring in the head, is independent of the will and can function without its support. But, if they are will-less, a Wichí's thoughts lack the guidance they require in order to operate adequately, like our car without its driver. The Wichí will co-ordinates and gives direction to untutored consciousness—the head's innate cognitive capacity—enabling it, for example, to solve problems by examining (*tetsan*) and reflecting on (*tichunejthli*) a question in search of knowledge and understanding. It is through the intervention of the will that the head is able to apply itself to constructive ends—both intellectual and, more importantly for the Wichí, moral.

One of the Wichí will's characteristics is brightness: Wichí speak of it as a source of light that illuminates intellectual darkness, suffusing it with lucidity. Another of the will's defining features is coolness. By Wichí criteria, thought is naturally anarchic and 'hot' (*chayo*). It is through presence of will (goodwill) that

this antisocial raw material is controlled and organized—converted, that is, into culturally valued, ‘cool’ orderliness. Having goodwill subdues unruly passions in a Wichí and induces in him the ideal state of composure (*tamsek ihi*), the composure of equanimity, or freedom from disruptive emotions (distress, fear, aggressiveness, excitation etc.).

The coolness of goodwill establishes a further connection between the will and the figure of the *niyat* (headman). A *niyat* is a person with an aptitude for ‘cool words’ that can tame human wildness: his words defuse conflictual situations by extinguishing the flame of ferocity that a dispute can kindle in individuals. Similarly, a Wichí’s goodwill tempers the heat of his unbridled mind. It is his source of self-control, like a personal inner headman.

Two specific mental capacities are identified by Wichí as evincing goodwill: discernment (*han-thlusek-ej/han-chowek-ej*, ‘knowing will’/‘knowing centre’) and right-mindedness (*tichunayaj ta is-athloho*, literally ‘straight thought’). Discernment is explained by Wichí as ‘knowing how to think’ (*ohanej otichunayaj ta ihi*): i.e. knowing how to think as a socially responsible adult rather than as an unsocialized child. Right-mindedness is expressing yourself in words and deeds that promote the social good. For the Wichí, these two expressions of goodwill imply an understanding of what the society defines as right and wrong: in other words, they are what it means for a Wichí to have a conscience. Since this conscience is founded on a consciousness of others—principally ego’s elders, from whom he acquires moral sense—Wichí morality consists firstly in being attentive to the wills of others, by heeding their words. Such attentiveness, both cause and effect of goodwill, eliminates from the subject naturally antisocial forms of behaviour and so fosters harmonious relations with others—which is the basic principle of social responsibility among the Wichí.

Given these restraints on the self in favour of the other(s), it is not surprising that obedience is an important feature of Wichí moral sense or goodwill: children should obey their parents, a daughter should not go against her father’s wishes in her choice of a marriage partner, a son-in-law should be subordinate (*ivo-wuk-a*) to his wife’s father. Such structures do not entail a complete denial of individual freedom: a girl can choose her own husband and refuse one recommended by her father; an uxorilocal husband’s life is not ruled by his affines—his bride-service, for example, is a step towards his becoming an independent head of family himself. For Wichí, dominance is not desired—to subjugate a person would be like depriving him of his will, which is a form of homicide. Instead, they value complementarity, whereby decisions are made, and actions taken, by mutual consent between self-determining individuals (whose wills are their own, even though they are amenable to influence by other wills and to this extent, therefore, socially formed). Structures of authority and obedience represent moral parameters that it is wrong to cross—in either direction: excessive authority is as wrong, by Wichí standards, as disobedience. They are structures that mark the boundary between social responsibility and social irresponsibility, presence or absence of goodwill.

## (b) Absence of will

Just as presence of goodwill (the social will) is apparent from socially responsible conduct—discernment and right-mindedness—its absence manifests itself in *amukweyaj*, asocial behaviour. To lack goodwill is to be centre-less (*naj-lechowej-a*); it is to be like a community without a central headman, lacking the agency that orders the thoughts, words, and actions of the body politic. It is to be divested of the Wichí cultural persona and to revert to natural man, the enemy of society.

The psychological corollaries of moral will-lessness—*la pensée sauvage* as understood by Wichí—are the inverse of the mental capacities associated with goodwill: thoughtlessness (*tichunayaj ihi-hit'a*), wrong-headedness (*tichunayaj ta is-hit'a athloho*, 'devious thought'), lack of discernment (*han-hit'a-thlusek-ej/haniyejtaq han-chowek-ej*), foolhardiness (*tik nowai*) and, above all, aggressiveness (*fwitseyaj*). These cognitive deficiencies can be summarized as deficiencies in respect either of rationality or of self-control (i.e. undisciplined—'will-less'—thoughts and emotions). They translate into forms of conduct that Wichí classify as social malpractices (*leqey ta niisa*), such as antagonism towards or derision of others, deceit, theft, adultery and wanton violence. Absence of goodwill thus amounts to a lack of moral sense, an ignorance of or disregard for the Wichí's rudimentary principle of social responsibility, which, as already explained, is to suppress the savage in oneself (i.e. the unsocialized ego) in order to avert others' animosity (by not unduly inflicting pain on them).<sup>4</sup>

The Wichí will is an innate virtuality of the person, but it requires fashioning by the community in order for the person to be able to belong to the community. Wichí society sustains itself by forming the wills of its new members—which is to say, by educating them to be individuals with goodwill ('presence of will'). A child who behaves in an unsocialized manner, who shows a lack of goodwill ('absence of will'), will be corrected—and this discipline is part of the process of socialization, of inducing goodwill (see above, with reference to fear).

Wichí speak, perhaps tendentiously, of the possibility of pathological moral will-lessness in individuals who fail to be socialized, who never acquire goodwill. The concomitant of their not becoming social beings is that they become antisocial beings: they are made members of the society of Ahattaj, 'Great Soul [of the dead]'. Ahattaj is characterized as aggressiveness incarnate (*ōfwitseyaj t'isan*, 'the embodiment of aggressiveness') and, as such, represents the devil in Wichí thought, which views aggressiveness as the cardinal sin in human society. ('Aggressiveness' here means natural savagery—impulsive use of violence—as

4. The Piaroa of Venezuela have a similar system of ideas interlinking their moral philosophy and their theory of the person. They understand social continuity to be inseparably related to social tranquillity, which depends on individual tranquillity. Individual tranquillity is achieved through self-control, itself a function of the will (*ta'kwakomena*), which 'tames', 'domesticates', 'masters' and 'controls' the 'unsocial, wild...forces' of the self, such as desires and emotions (Overing 1988).

distinct from rational, retaliatory acts of aggression, which are a legitimate, cultural response to hostilities of the first kind.) Ahattaj recruits humans to do its work of destruction. The type of person it 'likes' (*i humin*) and chooses as an agent is someone whom it recognizes as having 'devious thought' (*is-hit'a-athloho letichunayaj*), i.e. someone not in possession of his goodwill. It then turns the person into one of its own kind by appropriating his dispossessed will, either adopting it as a son (*yen-thlos-a*) or devouring it (*tuj ethl lehusek*). A seer can intercede with Great Soul in an attempt to save the person's will—if it has not already been devoured (and if the person has not already been dealt with by the community).

Goodwill, or presence of will in its social guise, thus comes to be a precondition of sociality. By immunizing a Wichí against possession by the cultural devil of aggressiveness—who cannot gain hold of a well-instated social will (i.e. a socialized ego)—it makes his membership of the social group possible.

### Conclusion

My conclusion is, not surprisingly, that presence of will is, for the Wichí, paradigmatic both of existential and of cultural order. Individual and social well-being both require the avoidance of its opposite—absence of will—which is paradigmatic of potential disorder, at both levels. During a Wichí's lifetime, loss of his innate physiological will (principally through fear) endangers the individual himself. His lack of a social-moral will endangers the community. Both physical health and moral sense are premised on wilfulness, in both Wichí senses of the term, namely, having both the instinctual will to be and also goodwill.

The Wichí will is thus at the interface between the individual and society, because both are interested in its possession and use. It interests the individual, to whom it naturally belongs, because its absence undermines his bodily existence. And it interests society (the social group that informs the adult individual's will and to which this, therefore, culturally belongs) because its absence in the individual—i.e. its failure to receive the mark of society—undermines corporate community existence.

### REFERENCES

- ALVARSSON, JAN-ÅKE 1988. *The Mataco of the Gran Chaco: An Ethnographic Account of Change and Continuity in Mataco Socio-Economic Organization* (Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology 11), Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

- DUFF-COOPER, ANDREW 1985. 'An Account of the Balinese "Person" from Western Lombok', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkendunde*, Vol. CXLI, no. 1, pp. 67–85.
- ... 1987. 'Some Imaginative Functions of Consciousness from a Balinese Form of Life on Lombok', *Anthropos*, Vol. LXXXII, nos. 1–3, pp. 63–85.
- HOWELL, SIGNE 1989. "'To be Angry is not to be Human, but to be Fearful is": Chewong Concepts of Human Nature', in Signe Howell and Roy Willis (eds.), *Societies at Peace: Anthropological Perspectives*, London: Routledge, pp.45–59.
- HUNT, R. J. 1937. *Mataco-English and English-Mataco Dictionary (With Grammatical Notes)*, Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag (reprinted from *Ethnological Studies*, no. 5 (1937), pp. 1–98).
- NAPIER, A. DAVID 1992. *Foreign Bodies: Performance, Art, and Symbolic Anthropology*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- OVERING, JOANNA 1988. 'Personal Autonomy and the Domestication of the Self in Piaroa Society', in Gustav Jahoda and I. M. Lewis (eds.), *Acquiring Culture: Cross Cultural Studies in Child Development*, London: Croom Helm, pp. 169–92.
- PERAMÁS, J. E. (SJ) 1868. 'Journal...contenant le récit des choses arrivées aux Jésuites du Paraguay en l'année de leur expulsion', in *Charles III et les Jésuites de ses États d'Europe et d'Amérique en 1767*, Paris, pp. 183–306.