Milton Bennett on Metaconsciousness, Intercultural Communication, and the DMIS

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I first met Milton Bennett at a seminar he gave in Tokyo in October 1992 entitled "Consciousness and Intercultural Communication." Over the years I've had an opportunity to attend quite a few of Milton's lectures and workshops, and also to learn more from him about consciousness, constructivism, and intercultural communication through private conversations. I regard Milton as both a teacher and mentor, who has stimulated what has turned out to be an ongoing (never-ending?) research interest in how constructivist ideas might be applied in the field of intercultural communication.

This article is a response to the keynote speech Milton gave at the 19th annual conference of the Japan Society for Multicultural Relations in Tokyo on November 17, 2019 entitled "Reconciling the Dilemmas of Intercultural Consciousness: Constructing Self-Reflexive Agency (Metaconsciousness)." The article also attempts to show how Milton's ideas about consciousness correlate with his constructivist approach to intercultural communication, his work on paradigms (Newtonian, Einsteinian, and quantum), and his Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, topics treated in the workshop Milton conducted on the previous day of the conference (November 16).

In developing his own ideas about the relation between consciousness and intercultural communication, Milton takes as his starting point the theory expounded by Julian Jaynes in his classic book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1990 [1976]). (I was first exposed to Jaynes' ideas as a college student

and played in a rock band at the time, which one of the members, who was also reading Jaynes, named "The Bicameral Mind"!) Jaynes' thesis is that a higher level of consciousness, which he calls *self-reflexive consciousness,* is a culturally evolved phenomena which arose only about 3,000 years ago with the fall of numerous civilizations in the Mediterranean and Near Eastern regions (a period known as the Late Bronze Age Collapse). Prior to that time, it is assumed that humans were *conscious* in the sense that they were awake (i.e., not asleep, or *unconscious*) and capable of having *sensations* (the ability to experience raw sense data), *perceptions* (the ability to distinguish one object from another), and *cognition* (the ability to construct categories, linguistic and otherwise, to understand their experience).

What *homo sapiens* have lacked for most of their 200,000-year history, however, is self-reflexive consciousness, which Jaynes defines as the ability to be aware of the role that we ourselves play in all of these processes. Rather than simply *have* sensations, perceptions, and cognitions, we acquire the ability to introspect and *reflect* on them. In self-reflexive consciousness we regard ourselves both as *subjects*, which have the power to act on the things we encounter in experience, and as *objects* in that we see ourselves as being only one among many other forces that exist in the world.

Before the Bronze Age Collapse, Jaynes contends that human consciousness was *pre-reflective*. Humans could think and act, but, lacking a sense of self, had no understanding of the role that themselves played in these processes. Human psychology was governed by what Jaynes refers to as a *bicameral mind,* in which the right hemisphere of the brain communicates with the left hemisphere through auditory hallucinations. (Jaynes regards contemporary cases of schizophrenia as a vestige of the bicameral mind.) Volition is based not on self-reflective consciousness, but simply on following the "commands" given by these auditory hallucinations. In support of this

claim, Jaynes compiled a considerable amount of evidence drawn from ancient literary sources, including Greek mythology and the Jewish Bible, which shows people acting in accordance with the "voices of the gods" and which Jaynes hypothesizes are in fact communications arising in the bicameral mind.

With the collapse of civilizations at the end of the Bronze Age, however, people began to migrate to new areas, thus encountering people who spoke different languages and had different ways of thinking from their own. The need to communicate interculturally with others about commonly shared experiences led to the emergence of a new form of consciousness, self-reflexive consciousness, which Jaynes regards as a psychological adaptation to an increasingly complex world, brought about by population growth, migration, and, consequently, increased contact among people who previously lived in smaller, more isolated groups. In short, wider encounters with others led people to question and critically examine their own way of thinking and to develop a new form of consciousness, in which individuals are able to self-reflect on their own ideas and actions, and to change them by rationally considering alternatives, rather than blindly (unreflectively) following the "voices," which they previously took to be commands from the gods.

Prior to the development of self-reflexive consciousness, humans lacked a clear sense of "self" as something that exists independently from other people and objects. The psychological perspective at this point is that anything that exists, exists as part of, rather than separately from, our own experience and, hence, as things that can be more or less treated as we wish, without showing any ethical concern for them. If we encounter a relatively small number of people outside our own group who are "different" and seem threatening to us, for example, we may deal with the situation by simply killing them (in Jaynes' theory because the voices tell us to).

This strategy becomes maladaptive, however, once we find ourselves surrounded by an ever-growing number of people (as occurred following the Bronze Age Collapse), since we recognize that the chances of us being killed by these numerous others are much greater than the chances of us killing them first. Self-reflexive consciousness thus evolves a more or less "live and let live" attitude, which insures our own self-preservation by psychologically acknowledging the independent existence of both ourselves and others. In other words, another person no longer exists simply as part of my own experience, but also externally as a genuine "other" distinct from myself.

With the appearance of self-reflexive consciousness, Jaynes contends that the bicameral mind began to "break down." People ceased having auditory hallucinations or at least stopped believing that these hallucinations came from the gods. The new social situation required people to cooperate with, rather than kill, each other. In the process of figuring out how to communicate with others despite not sharing a common language, self-reflexive consciousness emerges, which enables people to introspect and rationally reflect on their experiences, and thus better coordinate their activities with each other. Although Jaynes' theory of the bicameral mind remains controversial, it has gained qualified support from a variety of scholars, including the philosopher, Daniel Dennett (1986), and the evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins (2007), as one plausible, if not fully proven, hypothesis about how higher levels of consciousness might have evolved among humans.

Fortunately Milton's own treatment of consciousness can be established independently of Jaynes' theory, since, as mentioned previously, Milton uses Jaynes only as a starting point and not as the foundation for his own views. The key, and relatively uncontentious claims, are, first, that humans have indeed evolved higher forms of consciousness, which enable us to critically reflect on our experience as detached

observers, as attested to by recent research on metacognition, i.e., knowing about knowing, thinking about thinking, being aware of one's awareness (for a comprehensive overview see Dunlosky and Metcalfe 2009). The second claim, which should be familiar to most researchers in the field of intercultural communication, is that interactions with others, particularly people from other cultures, stimulates self-conscious reflection since such encounters oblige us to admit that our own views about life and the world can be challenged by the differing views of others.

Self-reflexive consciousness appears once we are able to differentiate between ourselves as an "I" and other persons and objects as "not-I." The "I" is not a substantival "thing" (*mind*, *psyche*, or *soul*) that is ontologically distinct from our bodies as Descartes and other philosophers have supposed, but rather a psychological construct we invent to capture the sense that we as individuals exist independently from the things that surround us. In self-reflexive consciousness the "I" becomes aware of the role that it plays in constructing its views about life. We do not simply follow what the gods (or voices) tell us to do, but begin to think for ourselves and to arrive at our own ideas about how to relate both to the world and to others in society.

In the process of constructing a distinction between self and others, we encounter a paradox, however, which is that the self can be simultaneously seen as a subject which experiences and an object which is experienced (the "I" is also a "me"). It is precisely the ability to experience ourselves as objects which allows us to develop self-reflexive consciousness, because now we are able to take a step back from ourselves and to look at ourselves from a point of view which is in a sense external to ourselves as experiencing subjects.

Moreover, in the process of recognizing that we ourselves are both subjects and objects, we come to recognize that other people are also both subjects and objects. In

other words, we become aware that others are not simply objects that we, as subjects, experience, but that they themselves are also subjects who experience us as objects. As a result we are able to develop what psychologists refer to as a *theory of mind*, i.e., the ability to recognize that other people have minds that are similar to but independent from our own.

In dealing with what we take to be the "objects" of our experience (both physical objects and other persons), we make what Milton refers to as *figure–ground* distinctions. We distinguish, for example, between the "tree" and the "forest" that surrounds it or, more generally between that which we direct our attention towards as *figure* and the relatively unnoticed things which surround it as *ground*. Without the ability to make figure–ground distinctions, the world would appear to us as an undifferentiated slush— what the philosopher, William James, called a "blooming, buzzing confusion" (1950 [1890], p. 488).

Distinctions between figure and ground are what make language possible, because we are able to sort the world into "things" which we can then label and categorize. A word such as *snowflake* is a term we create to talk about objects that we psychologically categorize as being in some sense "similar," even though they may in fact be quite different from each other (no two snowflakes are exactly alike). For Jaynes, the ability to use *metaphors* greatly extends the human capacity for categorization because they allow us to make the move from *concrete* to *abstract* thinking. We may, for example, use the word *head* concretely to refer to the "thing" at the top of our bodies, but we may also use it metaphorically, i.e., abstractly, to refer to such "things" as the "head of an army, table, page, bed, ship, household, or nail…" (Jaynes 1990, p. 49). Jaynes contends that the shift from concrete to metaphorical/abstract thinking is, in part, what enabled humans to

evolve higher levels of consciousness (for a more philosophical treatment of metaphors, see Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

From a constructivist perspective all categories—*constructs* in George Kelly's (1955) terminology, *schema* in Piaget's (1985)—linguistic and otherwise, are psychological creations, even though the reality they purport to describe may indeed have an independent existence apart from our awareness of it. (In numerous conversations I've had with Milton on this point, he always insists that constructivism is not a form of *solipsism*—the idealistic view that reality exists only "inside the head.") Nonetheless, we may adopt a *reified* view of the constructs we use for describing the world if we unwittingly regard them as being "given" to us in some way by external reality rather than as creations of our own minds. Milton often references Berger and Luckmann's classic book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), to drive home this point. In other words, while whatever is physically "real" is mind-independent, constructs are not.

Unlike physical reality, social reality has no external reality apart from human consciousness. Social phenomena, such as laws, national borders, and the value of money, have no objective existence in the absence of human consciousness. Cultural norms as well exist nowhere in the physical world but are rather brought into being (constructed) through human psychological processes. *Culture,* then, is simply a set of norms intersubjectively shared in varying degrees by the members of a given social group. Moreover, once these norms disappear from consciousness, they cease to exist. In Anthony Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, social realities continue to exist only to the extent that they are *reproduced* intersubjectively by the individual members of a given society.

Milton similarly resolves what is known as the structure–agency debate by seeing social *structures* as being maintained through the *agency* of individuals. In a

conversation I had with him just prior to his keynote speech, Milton suggested that a social institution, such as democracy, ceases to exist once people lose faith in it and stop voting. Nonetheless, it is not uncommon for people to adopt a reified view of social reality by thinking that cultural norms are given to us by nature rather than being socially constructed (e.g., humans are *by nature* competitive, so capitalism is the best economic system vs. humans are *by nature* cooperative, so communism is the best economic system).

Constructivists contend to the contrary that if social realities are constructed through communicative practices, then they can also be dismantled and *reconstructed*. This process of reconstruction is possible precisely because humans are capable of engaging in self-reflective thought. Even though each of us is socialized into accepting the cultural norms of the societies we are brought up in, we are never beholden to those norms. Rather, we can think critically and imaginatively about whether we wish to maintain existing cultural norms or to radically change them. Since cultural norms are just ideas in the head, they can be freely criticized both *within* and *between* cultures. While we should always avoid criticizing the *people* of a culture which is different from our own, it is still possible to critically (and constructively) evaluate their *norms* in the same way that it is possible to critically evaluate the norms of our own culture.

What enables us to engage in critical reflection is *metaconsciousness,* which is simply the ability to be conscious of our own consciousness. Not only do we become aware of the role that we play in constructing our ideas about the physical world and social reality (self-reflexive consciousness), but we become aware that we ourselves have the ability to control this process (metaconsciousness). In other words, it is metaconsciousness that allows us to recognize our own powers of agency. If we don't like the ideas and norms we have constructed on the basis of self-reflexive consciousness,

we are able to question, challenge, refine, and indeed change them through the use of metaconsciousness.

At the level of self-reflexive consciousness, we recognize that others have an independent existence from ourselves and are, therefore, *autonomous* in the same way that we ourselves are. That is, we see that other individuals are capable of making their own judgments about how their ideas are or should be constructed, and these may differ from the judgments we make about our own constructions. Thus, there may be significant differences between how the members of one cultural group construct their views of the physical world and social reality and how the members of other cultural groups construct their own views.

As a result, we may be inclined to adopt the cultural relativist position that, in the interest of avoiding conflict with people from other cultures whose views are different from our own, we should simply accept and respect all cultures just as they are. This stance is widely accepted among practitioners in the field of intercultural communication and has served us well in the past, but nonetheless, as Milton contends, has severe limitations. The main problem is that cultural relativism easily leads to the view that one person's opinion is as good as another's, a view which has been coopted in recent times by those who wish maintain their own position on any given issue without giving persuasive arguments in its defense. Some people think global warming exists; others don't. Since no objective arguments can be made in favor of one opinion over the other, "truth" is simply a matter of whatever we think it is.

While cultural relativism is often regarded as a "progressive" point of view, since it adopts the "live and let live" mentality of self-reflexive consciousness, it is in fact highly regressive and tradition-bound. Precisely because cultural relativism goes no further than to contend that different cultures construct their ideas differently, it fails to

consider how people from different cultures might constructively critique their existing cultural norms and imaginatively create entire new norms that might enable them to cooperate more effectively with each other.

Milton criticizes both the tendency of *modernism,* based on a Newtonian worldview, to think that there are certain absolutes which should be universally adopted by all cultures since they are part of objective reality or "nature" and hence not subject to cultural variation, and the tendency of *postmodernism,* based on an Einsteinian worldview, to see any and all ideas as being subjective/intersubjective and thus relative to the cultural context in which they appear. Milton's favored approach is *constructivism,* which concurs with the quantum view that observers are themselves part of the reality they are observing (Bennett 2005; 2013; for an independent treatment of these perspectives, see Evanoff 2004; 2006). That is, we do not simply passively observe the world and other people but actively engage ourselves with them. Constructions are not simply a matter of subjective opinion, but are created through the interactions we have both with the world and with others in society.

Jaynes' concept of self-reflexive consciousness only takes us, as it were, to the postmodern level. We recognize that each of us actively constructs our view of the world and social reality, both individually and collectively as members of a given culture. We further recognize that others are capable, both individually and collectively of constructing their own distinct ideas about physical and social reality. It may be concluded from the standpoint of self-reflexive consciousness that since there are no absolutes (in the Newtonian sense), we should therefore simply accept and respect different cultures as they are, since any ideas that a given individual may have are only understandable in the context of the particular culture that person is a member of (as the

Einsteinian worldview suggests) and it is impossible to critique the point of view of any other culture except from the perspective of one's own culture.

The next step, in Milton's view, is for us to move from a relativist position based on self-reflexive consciousness to a constructivist perspective based on metaconsciousness. In the same way that self-reflexive consciousness was a suitable evolutionary adaptation to changing circumstances in the past, when cultural differences needed to be recognized, metaconsicouness is an appropriate evolutionary adaptation to the present, when differences need to be not simply recognized but also negotiated.

In self-reflexive consciousness the "I" recognizes itself as distinct from the "not-I" (oneself and others). Moreover, as the "I" becomes cognizant of the role that it plays in constructing its views of the world, it also becomes aware that others, particularly people from different cultures, construct their own views, which may be different from one's own, a perspective which leads effortlessly to the notion that all ideas, values, and norms are relative to the particular social contexts in which they appear.

In metaconsciousness, however, the "I" is aware not only that it and other "I's" are responsible for constructing their own views of the world (self-reflexive consciousness), but also that each "I" has the ability to direct and control its own constructions (metaconsciousness). Whereas self-reflexive consciousness always remains *inside* the process of construct formation, metaconsciousness allows us to step outside the process and to critically examine it from a detached point of view. Consider the difference between baking a cake and being aware that we are following a recipe that someone (either ourselves or others) has at some point in time constructed (self-reflexive consciousness) and being aware that if we don't like the recipe we can change it (metaconsciousness).

To the extent that I am able to critically examine my own constructive activities from a meta-perspective, I realize not only that I am engaging in constructive activity as such, but also that I am "in charge" of directing my own thoughts and behavior. It is metaconsciousness, then, which leads us to a recognition of what Milton refers to as our own *agency*. Moreover, it is this acquired sense of agency that allows us to take ethical responsibility for how we think and act.

Milton's theory of metaconsciousness can be (roughly) mapped onto his Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett 1993; 2013; see also Yamamoto 1996). As with all stage models of psychological development, the empirical question of whether people actually move through each of the stages in the order given (sometimes they do and sometimes they don't) is separate from the philosophical question of whether the stages represent a logical progression moving from simple to more complex levels of experience. In the case of Milton's DMIS, increases in one's experience of cultural difference lead to increases in cultural sensitivity, which in turns lead to increases in consciousness.

The most basic ethnocentric stage in Milton's model, the stage of *denial*, correlates more or less to a pre-reflexive level of consciousness. Individuals are conditioned through socialization processes to unquestioningly accept the norms of the particular cultures they grow up in. They typically hold the reified view that one's own cultural norms are simply "the way things are." Culture is as "natural" to them as the air they breathe and they have no awareness (consciousness) that things could be otherwise.

The bubble of one's own cultural experience is pricked the moment that individuals are exposed to cultures which are different from their own. At the second ethnocentric stage, *defense,* difference is recognized, but it is thought that only one of the competing sets of cultural norms can be "right" or "correct." This stage may be

compared to the stage of intellectual and ethical development referred to by Perry (1970) as *dualism*. (In the remainder of this article I will follow the simplified version of Perry's model used by Milton in his lectures.) Most people generally assume that the norms of their own culture are superior to those of other cultures, although in *reversal* individuals may come to think that the norms of another culture are superior to their own. Individuals at the stage of defense may be tempted to think that their own cultural norms should be imposed on other cultures (cultural imperialism) or, in the case of reversal, that their own culture should assimilate the norms of the other culture.

The third ethnocentric stage of intercultural sensitivity, *minimization,* adopts the view that any cultural differences we encounter can only be superficial since underneath people are basically the "same." This stance is often grounded on an essentialist view of human nature (there are certain fundamental characteristics which are shared by all humans) and often engages in the quixotic attempt to identify "core" human beliefs, values, and norms regarded as *absolute,* in that they do not change over time, and *universal,* since they are (or should be) adopted by everyone (similar to the Newtonian worldview). Perennial philosophy and the search for "cultural universals" in anthropology are examples, since both have a tendency to focus almost exclusive attention on cultural similarities while minimizing cultural differences. Consciousness at both the defense and minimization stages is reflective, but not yet self-reflexive, because it still holds the reified view that cultural norms are something to be discovered rather than something we create.

With the general shift from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative perspective, however, consciousness acquires self-reflexivity once we recognize that there is more than one way of understanding the world and our place in it, and thus become aware of the constructed nature of both our own cultural norms and those of other cultures. At the

fourth stage of the DMIS, *acceptance,* we simply accept cultural differences as they are, without trying to modify or improve them. Similar to the stage of *multiplicity* in Perry's model, we acknowledge that there is no one "true" or "correct" culture but rather regard all cultural norms as equally valid. While we have broken out of our own cultural molds, so to speak, we may also experience confusion (*anomie*) at this stage since we are unsure about which cultural norms we should commit ourselves to. Nonetheless, trying to figure out which norms we should accept and which we should reject is what starts us down the road of self-reflexive consciousness. At this point we may see that the acceptance of cultural diversity provides us with a means for getting along with others in multicultural situations, although we have not yet developed the more critical perspective of metaconsciousness, which allows us to actively critique existing cultural forms in both our own and another culture, and to creatively imagine new ones.

The ability to engage in such critiques only begins to develop during the fifth stage of the DMIS: *adaptation*. An immature view of adaptation sees it simply as the attempt to *assimilate* oneself to the norms of another culture, sometimes by crudely imitating the thoughts and behavior of people from that culture. The assimilationist approach to adaptation is best expressed in the proverb, "When in Rome do as the Romans do," and also corresponds to the stage of *contextual relativism* in Perry's model. We begin to see all constructions as valid only within the particular culture in which they are formulated and may be inclined to adopt the relativist view that since any criticisms we may make of another culture can only be made from a standpoint within our culture, all cultures should simply be respected as they are.

While there are certainly occasions in which it is best to simply follow the norms of another culture out of respect (I always take my shoes off when I enter a Japanese house even though that is not a norm in my own culture), it soon becomes apparent that it

is impossible for persons to completely give up their own culture and thoroughly assimilate themselves to a different culture. Rather quickly sojourners typically begin to engage in a more selective approach, in which they adopt *some* of the norms of the other culture while rejecting others. Simultaneously they may come to have a greater appreciation for their original culture and thus wish to selectively retain *some* elements of their own culture while rejecting others.

Now, what exactly is it that enables us to engage in this process of selectivity? The answer, as suggested by Milton, is metaconsciousness, which allows us to step outside the perspective of our own respective cultures and to consider the views of people whose cultures are different from our own (this, indeed, is the key point of ethnorelativism). At the same time, however, we do not simply accept or adapt ourselves to all the norms of another culture. Rather, using metaconsciousness, we begin to critically reflect on the norms of other cultures as part of the process of selectively deciding which aspects of the other culture we wish to adopt as our own. The process is essentially dialectical in the Hegelian sense, since it involves determining which aspects of our own culture (the *thesis*) we wish to retain and which we wish to reject, and which aspects of the other culture (the *antithesis*) we wish to adopt and which we wish to reject. This dialectical process actually commences the very moment that cultural differences are recognized (following the denial stage) and is continuous throughout each of the stages on the DMIS continuum.

The problem here is that the conflict between the thesis and antithesis (my culture and yours) may lead to something akin to a "split personality" if tensions between the two cannot be reconciled within one's own mind. Yoshikawa's (1987) double-swing model notes, but does not fully resolve this dilemma, by suggesting that individuals shift between cultural frames depending the cultural group they are interacting with (I act like

a Japanese when I'm with Japanese people and like an American when I'm with Americans). To avoid simply swinging back and forth between opposing cultural norms, metaconsciousness may be used as a way to construct new ways of thinking which combine what we take to be positive aspects of both cultures, while rejecting the negative aspects. This results in a Hegelian *synthesis* of what were originally regarded as two sets of conflicting cultural norms. In Milton's DMIS, this stage is referred to as *integration*. The term *third-culture building* (Casmir 1993) may also be used to designate a process in which we, not only as children but also adults, are able to integrate elements of our own (first) culture with those of another (second) culture to create a new (third) culture.

There are two points I would like to add as refinements to Milton's model (for a fuller treatment of both points, see Evanoff 2009). The first is that the DMIS is primarily concerned with integration at the psychological level: how do individuals reconcile cultural differences within their own way of thinking? Integration can also be regarded, however, as a *social process* in which people from different cultures negotiate differences between themselves by engaging in intercultural dialogue with each other. Integration can also be considered at the *formal level* as the attempt to reconcile conflicting points of view into a more comprehensive conceptual framework, which may be able to overcome cultural and ideological divisions among people. While metaconsciousness is indeed an individual psychological phenomenon, it may nonetheless be effectively employed at each of these levels.

Second, it seems possible for a seventh stage to be included in the DMIS, namely a *generative* stage, which goes beyond simply combining elements of existing cultures in novel ways (as occurs at the integration stage) to the active construction of entirely new forms of culture that never existed before. Humans are confronted with a wide range of emergent problems that we did not have to face in the past and which cannot be

addressed simply by appealing to traditional cultural norms, whether alone or in combination with each other. Global warming, for example, cannot be effectively dealt with simply by constructing an ecological ethic on the basis of existing cultural norms, but rather requires a complete rethinking of how our cultures in general and our economies in particular relate to the environment. Fortunately, in addition to its ability to critically examine existing cultural forms, metaconsciousness also has an imaginative side, which may be employed to generate entirely new forms of society and culture to deal with such problems. Empirical research in the field of intercultural communication, which is confined by its own disciplinary boundaries to describing existing forms of culture, can be profitably supplemented with more normative, philosophical studies aimed at imagining solutions to problems that are mutually faced by people from different cultures (Evanoff 2015).

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