Evanoff, Richard (1998). "A Constructivist Approach to Intercultural Ethics." *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics* 8(3):84–87.

A Constructivist Approach to Intercultural Ethics

Richard Evanoff

Traditional empiricism, following John Locke, has tended to see the human mind as a blank slate on which nature inscribes itself. In more recent times we have virtually reversed that relationship by seeing nature as the blank slate on which the human mind inscribes itself with its own socially constructed meanings. The first point of view is compatible with a realist approach to ethics which believes that moral truths and values can be directly discerned in nature. According to this view it should be possible for people to reach universal agreement on ethical matters regardless of any cultural differences that may exist between them by simply looking at nature-that is, at either the natural world or "human nature"-and seeing what is the case. This view is prevalent in the West and it also informs much of the debate on global issues in international forums such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization.

The second point of view is compatible with an idealist approach to ethics which regards moral truths and values as culturally determined. According to this view ethical norms are contextual, that is, they are incommensurable across historical and geographical boundaries. Dialogue between cultures is therefore difficult if not impossible. This view is prevalent both among Western postmodernists such as Jean Francois Lyotard (1984) who argue that any attempt to arrive at uniform standards of truth or value involves the construction of a totalizing metanarrative which is inherently oppressive to the voices of minorities, and also among those cultural relativists who argue, for example, that it is impossible for either the West to criticize Asia or for Asia to criticize the West because their respective systems of values are simply too different.

In contrast to these two approaches, I would like to argue for a third, interactive, perspective which sees meaning, value, aesthetic beauty, and indeed knowledge, not as the exclusive property of an objective reality standing outside of all human perceptions and valuations nor as merely the product of subjective mental processes. This interactionist view is constructivist, in that it sees meanings, values, knowledge, and so forth as arising out of the interplay between historically and culturally situated actors, on the one hand, and an objective reality, on the other, which while itself historical and mediated through humanly constructed meanings, is nonetheless not exhausted by those meanings.

I follow here the idea of the personal construct psychologist, George Kelly: there a variety of ways in which the world can be construed. And while I also believe that these cultural constructions can legitimately vary across cultures, I maintain with Kelly that some constructions can be regarded as better than others. To quote Kelly, "We assume that all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement" (1963, 15). This implies that while there may be a strong tendency to accept the cultural constructions that we have been socialized into believing, we are always free to abandon those constructions if we find, or can come up with, something that we think is better.

There are two strands of constructivist theory that can be drawn on. The first is the Piagetian tradition (Piaget 1932, 1971), which arose out of Kantianism and is primarily concerned with the direct interactions individuals have with nature. Contemporary interpreters include Michael A. Arbib and Mary B. Hesse (1986), Richard Kitchener (1986), and Ernst von Glasersfeld (1995). In the field of ethics and morality probably the best-known Piagetian is Lawrence Kohlberg (1981-84). According to Kohlberg, moral values are the product neither of innate biological tendencies (meaning that the job of educators is simply to help students "clarify" what their values are) nor of cultural transmission (meaning that the job of educators is to indoctrinate students into current, socially accepted values). Rather, they arise out of individuals reflecting directly on their own experience with the world.

The process of reflection, a notion Kohlberg takes from Dewey (1916), is pragmatic in that it helps the individual attain a life that is not only livable but also worth living. On the one hand, the reflective process contributes to human survival; on the other, it allows individuals to construct meaningful goals and objectives for the future which structure current action. It is also evolutionary, a theme explored by evolutionary epistemologists such as Donald Campbell (1974) and Konrad Lorenz (1977): as new situations and problems arise new responses and solutions must be arrived at. We cannot expect the morality of the past to guide us through the problems of the present but must instead continually be constructing new moral norms to meet the demands of our ever-changing situation. While Piagetians typically think of cognitive or moral development as proceeding in stages towards fixed teleological ends, a more appropriate evolutionary model is actually the one proposed by Darwin-that is, evolution, whether biological, cognitive, moral, cultural, or ecological tends towards greater diversity; it is multilinear rather than unilinear and proceeds through a process of branching or, in psychological terms, through achieving greater levels of differentiation and integration.

Now, to the extent that the process of reflection aims to be comprehensive we can speak of what the philosopher John Rawls refers to in his recent book, *Political Liberalism* (1996), as moral constructivism. This is the process by which individuals and groups attempt to formulate the fundamental moral principles they take as normative. But since we do not live our lives exclusively as isolated individuals or groups, but rather as members of broader cultures and societies where there are many competing comprehensive moral doctrines, it is necessary for us to also arrive at a set of shared principles which will govern the societies we live in. For philosophers such as Rawls the process by which these shared principles can be arrived at is referred to as political constructivism. Political constructivism does not attempt to arrive at a single universal set of ethical norms applicable at all times and to all peoples, but rather to construct, through a process of a dialogue, an overlapping consensus which allows people with different foundational principles to nonetheless reach basic agreement on the rules that will govern their societies. The affinities with pragmatism are clear. While the members of a particular political community need not agree on a full range of foundational moral principles, nonetheless there must be sufficient agreement to allow the individuals to address mutually shared problems and concerns. This position, I think, can be applied not only within, but also between, cultures.

While Rawls' earlier work, as advanced in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), has been severely criticized for assuming that there is a universal rationality upon which a concept of justice can be grounded, his more recent work, as exemplified in *Political Liberalism,* is more historically and culturally sensitive. Nonetheless, a key component of Rawls' position is the view that even though they are social beings, individuals nonetheless retain a sufficient degree of autonomy to criticize current social arrangements and to imaginatively construct

new social arrangements as they see necessary. In democratic societies, this means that each individual should have the ability to participate in the process of dialogue by which social rules are proposed and decided upon. Rawls' view overlaps here with Habermas's (1989) notion of an "ideal speech situation," in which dialogue is conducted in a free and open manner and no one attempts to dominate, suppress, or otherwise coerce the other participants. It should be noted that this is a normative rather than a descriptive position-that is, something that should be aspired to in dialogue with others not something that necessarily obtains in actual dialogues, whether cross-cultural or otherwise.

This brings us to the second strand of constructivist theory, namely that of social constructionism, which has its philosophical origins in the work of Hegel and Marx, and its sociological origins in the interactionist strand of sociology which begins with Weber, extends through Mead (1934) and the symbolic interactionists (Blumer 1969), and is carried on by contemporary sociologists such as Anthony Giddens (1984).

Unlike Piagetian constructivists who are concerned with interactions between individuals and their external environments, social constructionists are primarily concerned with interactions between individuals and their social environments. Social constructionists have in fact criticized Piagetian constructivism on the grounds that the latter takes insufficient account of the fact that most of what we learn about the world is not through direct exploration but rather through social transmission. Cultural psychologists such as Richard A. Shweder argue that we cannot simply assume that humankind shares a fundamental "psychic unity" (1990, 4). Mind, in his view, is not purely biological, i.e., it cannot be reduced to physiology, but is rather constituted through both the interactions it has with the natural world and the interactions it has with others in society. Shweder and his associates suggest that cultural psychology involves "a three-body problem in which self, society, and nature jointly make up self, society, and nature" (1990, viii).

We can speak, then, not only of a dialectical interaction between individuals and their natural environments, as the Piagetians do, but also of a dialectical interaction between individuals and their social environments. In Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966)-which is still perhaps the best theoretical statement of social constructionism-the dialectic expresses itself in the process by which humans create culture and culture in turn creates humans. In constructing a meaning system, humans objectify themselves; that is, meanings, while humanly produced, become objective facts of the social world which individuals are then socialized into. Only when these meanings become reified do we lose sight of the fact that they are, after all, human constructs which we presumably have ultimate control over. What prevents social constructionism from becoming social determinism is the fact that individuals always retain-to return now to Kant and Rawls-a healthy measure of autonomy, that is, the ability to critically reflect on existing social arrangements and to propose entirely new, and possibly better, alternatives.

Constructivism, as I use the term, thus employs a double dialectic: first, the dialectic between individuals and an objective, problematic situation, and second, the dialectic between individuals and socially constructed interpretations of those situations. Society tells us how to view the world and act in it, but it is through our direct encounters with the world that we are able to decide whether society has been a good teacher for us or not. Constructivism is by no means incompatible with an ontological realist perspective which acknowledges that ethical problems exist apart from our constructions of them, or better, that our various constructions are simply different ways of trying to come to terms with actual problems. The criteria for

deciding whether any given construction is adequate or not lies in its ability to solve the particular problem at hand.

Cross-cultural dialogue on ethics arises when two or more societies with differing ethical norms enter into dialogue with each other on mutually shared problems. In the absence of any form of communication across cultures, the problem of cross-cultural criticism does not arise. Cultures, like species, have historically evolved over time. With sufficient geographical isolation, cultures can work out pretty much for themselves how they will adapt themselves to their natural environments and provide what is regarded as a meaningful human life for their members.

I would argue that in light of current globalizing tendencies and the emergence of environmental problems that cut across national lines, the ultimate "context" that we must concern ourselves with is a global one. In other words, the current context is itself a universal, or at least a near-universal, one. It will not do to simply think of contexts in terms of boundaries drawn more or less arbitrarily between various identity groups, including cultural and national groups. Nigel Dower has offered the following maxim which is, I think, a good starting point for any reflection on the possibility of doing ethics interculturally: "Where the lines of cause and effect run across nation-states, so do the lines of moral responsibility" (1984, 20). And in the present global context the lines of cause and effect seem to be running everywhere. As Peter Bahouth (1994) has shown in a tragically amusing article in the *Earth Island Journal,* just eating a tomato these days lends tacit support to pesticide use, labor exploitation, the destruction of old-growth forests, the polluting of the atmosphere, and the depletion of energy resources on a scale that is truly international.

Dean C. Barnlund (1979), working out of the field of intercultural communication, has proposed that we need a new "metaethic" which could offer a superordinate set of guidelines to govern communication between cultures. I do not think that such an ethic can be fashioned by simply urging non-Western cultures to adopt any of the West's existing ethical systems, any more than Westerners would want to simply take on a Confucianist ethic or an animist worldview, even though any or all these systems could perhaps be used as opening gambits in some kind of intercultural dialogue. On the other hand, I am equally opposed to any form of cultural relativism which encourages us to simply "respect" each other's cultural traditions. In addition to the logical criticism of cultural relativism (if we say all is relative, then the statement "all is relative" itself must be relative) I would like to advance a pragmatic criticism. If we simply say, "O.K., you have your way of doing things and I have mine, and we have to respect each other," then nothing gets done. We never learn to work together.

Cross-cultural encounters are anomalous situations because the ethical norms which individuals might appeal to in order to govern the behavior of the interactors may not yet exist. The standard way of resolving this problem is to suggest that one or the other of the individuals concerned should simply adapt himself or herself to the culture which is dominant in that particular situation. "When in Rome do as the Romans do." This solution doesn't really solve the problem of ethnocentricism, however, because it is so one-sided. One of the interactors gives up all; the other gives up nothing. Moreover, the dominant culture then becomes immune from any form of criticism, whether from without or within; the culture comes to be regarded in essentialist rather than constructivist terms: this is the way things are; there's no point in trying to change them. Here one clearly sees how cultural relativism can become a convenient device for simply maintaining the status quo. Autonomous ethical reflection, of the type Socrates was willing to engage in and die for, never takes the norms

constructed by a particular culture as final or absolute. They are always open to criticism and, possibly, to revolutionary change.

Cross-cultural criticism can be of four types. The first is a purely ethnocentric form of criticism which is based primarily on cultural stereotypes and sees one's own culture as superior to the other. For example, Western individualism is right; Japanese groupism is wrong. Or in the relatively more sophisticated Japanese version: individualism is right for the West, but wrong for the Japanese, and no matter how hard they try, Westerners will never understand groupism quite the way Japanese do. It is repugnance over ethnocentric criticism that leads many to conclude that cultural relativism is the only alternative.

A second type of criticism, however, is internal criticism which permits critical reflection on one's own cultural constructions. It may involve teasing apart quite different meanings which happen to designated by the same term. In the West we can discriminate between individualism as mere self-indulgence and individualism as Emersonian self-reliance. Critical reflection would, I hope, lead most of us to conclude that the latter is morally superior to the former. Similarly in Japan connotations of both cooperation and blind conformity are subsumed under the term *wa* -maintaining the harmony of the group. Critical reflection might suggest, however, that genuine cooperation is in fact not the same thing as blind conformity, and that the former is superior to the latter.

A third-type of criticism is cross-cultural criticism, in which the positive aspects of one culture are used to criticize the negative aspects of another culture. Thus, we hear these days in Japan many voices calling out for more individualism, less group conformity. In the West, on the other hand, we hear a growing number of voices crying out for more community and less individualism. Each side obviously has something the other can learn from. One obvious danger, however, is the possibility that Japanese will learn only Western self-indulgence and not self-reliance or that the West will learn only Japanese conformity and not cooperation. There is also the danger of a reverse form of ethnocentricism in which each side goes over to its opposite and denigrates the positive features of its own culture. One can see this perhaps in some Western deep ecologists who, rather than attempt to rejuvenate an impoverished Western spiritual tradition, end up doing Buddhist meditation, sitting in Native American sweat lodges, or going on vision quests.

The fourth type of criticism is what I call "hybrid," or integrative criticism. The idea here is that over time it may be possible for two traditions to reach higher levels of integration and form a "third culture." The concept of a "third culture" was first employed in the field of intercultural communication to refer to children who had grown up in two cultures and integrated aspects of both into their own way of thinking. I use the term to refer to any similar, conscious effort to integrate cultural norms which on first encounter seem incommensurable. Hybrid criticism, having teased apart the different meanings of terms such as individualism and *wa* (harmony), is then able to combine the "best" from each-to combine, for example, Western-style self reliance with Japanese-style cooperation. Gandhi, although neither a Japanese nor a Westerner, would perhaps be a good exemplar of such a fusion. Hybrid cultures can also combine the "worst" features of each cultural tradition, of course. Putting the conformist tendency in Japan together with American-style self-indulgence might yield a personality such as Hitler's.

Note that while I have suggested that both criticism and a merging of ethical orientations is possible across cultures, this is in no way represents a "universal" ethical discourse in any

absolute or foundational sense. Cross-cultural ethics can only be forged through extended dialogue or cross-cultural experience and is, in any event, inclusive only of the cultures directly involved. Dialogue does not have to be fully integrative, of course, to achieve results. Total convergence is unnecessary; all that we need is enough to get the job done.

References

Arbib, Michael A. and Mary B. Hesse (1986). *The Construction of Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bahouth, Peter (1994). "The Attack of the Killer Tomato," *Earth Island Journal,* Summer 1994.

Barnlund, Dean C. (1979). "The Cross-Cultural Arena: An Ethical Void." In N. C. Asuncio-Lande, ed., *Ethical Perspectives and Critical Issues in Intercultural Communication*. Falls Church: Speech Communication Association.

Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Anchor.

Blumer, Herbert G. (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

Campbell, Donald T. (1974). "Evolutionary Epistemology." In Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*. La Salle: Open Court.

Dewey, John (1916). *Democracy and Education*. New York: Macmillan.

Dower, Nigel (1984). "What Is Environmental Ethics?" In Nigel Dower, ed., *Ethics and Environmental Responsibility*. Aldershot: Avery.

Giddens, Anthony (1984). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Glasersfeld, Ernst von (1995). *Radical Constructivism: A Way of Knowing and Learning* London: Falmer Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (1989). *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Kelly, George A. (1963). *A Theory of Personality: The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Kitchener, Richard F. (1986). *Piaget's Theory of Knowledge: Genetic Epistemology and Scientific Reason*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Kohlberg, Lawrence (1981-84). *Essays on Moral Development*. 2 vols. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Lorenz, Konrad (1977). *Behind the Mirror: A Search for a Natural History of Human Knowledge*. Trans. Ronald Taylor. London: Methuen.

Lyotard, Jean-François (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Mead, George Herbert (1934). *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Piaget, Jean (1932). *The Moral Judgement of the Child*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co.

______ (1971). *The Construction of Reality in the Child*. Trans. M. Cook. New York: Basic Books.

Rawls, John (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

______ (1996). *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Shweder, Richard A. (1990). "Cultural Psychology-What Is It?" In James W. Stigler, Richard A. Shweder, and Gilbert Herdt, eds., *Cultural Psychology: Essays on Comparative Human Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.