Article

The Construction of Values
and Ethics Across Cultures—Part 1

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Introductory note

This paper is the first of a two-part series, which offers a constructivist theory of values and ethics from an intercultural perspective. Part 1, published here, develops a constructivist theory of value and introduces a constructivist approach to ethics by looking at the role that reflective processes play in the construction of ethical norms both within and between cultures. Part 2, published separately, considers how intercultural ethics can be regarded as both an "art" and a "science." A bibliography for the entire paper is given at the end of Part 2.

A constructivist theory of value

In the same way that what is taken to be knowledge varies from culture to culture, what is regarded as having value is also culturally variable. Values, as much as facts, are not pre-given in the world itself but are rather a matter of constructive activity. From the constructivist point of view facts and values are both particular ways of construing events, which require us to categorize objective phenomena according to mental constructs. There are multifarious ways in which objects can be construed and no single construal will exhaust what a given phenomenon actually "is" or how it can be valued. There can thus be legitimate differences in our descriptions even though it can be recognized that some construals will be more efficacious than others. Different individuals and

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different cultures will read different values into and out of the world.

Constructs can be either descriptive or evaluative, and value judgments can be regarded as cognitive in much the same way that factual judgments are. When I construe the bowl of sliced apples, bananas, and oranges in front me of as "fruit cocktail" the construct is descriptive. When I construe that same bowl of sliced apples, bananas, and oranges as "delicious" the construct is evaluative. Both construals, it should be noted, are cognitive. Natural languages contain both terms that are descriptive and terms that are evaluative. When evaluative terms are "thick" ("lavish," "insane") rather than "thin" ("good," "wrong"), they can be both at the same time (see Williams 1985, chap. 7). Putnam (1993) notes that sentences such as "Caligula was a mad tyrant" can simultaneously be regarded as descriptive statements and value judgments (see also Putnam 2002).

The criteria for sorting phenomena into evaluative categories are also constructed. Fruit can just as easily be sorted evaluatively into the categories "good" and "bad" (based on, say, the degree of ripeness or rottenness) as it can be sorted conceptually into "apples," "bananas," and "oranges" (based on, say, color, size, and shape). The criteria are never absolute, of course, but are rather constructed in accordance with specific purposes. A fruit vendor may construe spotless apples as "good" and spotted apples as "bad," but the exact same spotted apples that are discarded by the vendor may be considered "good" by someone who cuts out the spots and makes applesauce. The fact that the exact same object can be construed as "good" according to one set of criteria and "bad" according to another, suggests that goodness, is not, as moral realists claim (e.g., Moore 1971), an intrinsic property of objects, but rather dependent on humanly constructed criteria.

The view that any criterion is itself constructed is consistent with Putnam's position:

> Standards and practices, pragmatists have always insisted, must be developed together and constantly revised by a process of delicate mutual adjustment. The standards by which we judge and compare

our moral images are themselves creations as much as the moral images. (1987, p. 79)

In creating such standards, we engage in what Toulmin calls "rule-testing" behavior, a process in which ". . . the rules themselves . . . become the objects of our intellectual activity, and not merely elements in its production" (1974, p. 195, italics omitted).

Nonetheless, even though both the criteria and the images are constructs and not what Putnam calls "The Universe's Own Moral Truths," this does not mean they are arbitrary. Knives, to use Putnam's own example, are literally human creations. Even though there are a variety of ways in which knives can be designed, they must still meet certain functional requirements if they are to be useful. Putnam writes,

> . . . we don't make them [knives] according to Nature's Own Blueprint, nor is there always one design which is forced upon all designers by Natural Law (when we make knives, we don't follow The Universe's Own Design for a Knife), but it doesn't follow that the knives we make don't satisfy real needs, and knives may certainly be better or worse. (1987, p. 78; see also Ruth Anna Putnam 1985)

Thus, while objects can be valued according to a variety of criteria, this does not mean that values are merely subjective. Just as our epistemological constructs are constrained by how things actually stand in the world, so too are our value constructs.

Values, as much as facts, can be thought about in terms of a dialectical logic. In the same way that factual statements cannot be judged as true or false except within the context of some conceptual scheme, value statements also cannot be judged as right or wrong except within the context of a particular value scheme. It is impossible to claim that something is "good" or "bad" in any absolute sense, but only in accordance with the criteria of the particular value scheme we are using. Once a specific scheme has been decided upon, however, the act of evaluating a given phenomenon is just as cognitive as the act of describing it.

Values, therefore, are not intrinsic to objects but rather exist in the relationship between objects that are valued and subjects who value them. That is, the criteria for deciding whether an object is of value are not supplied by the object itself but rather constructed by the subject who evaluates it. The word *value* is better thought of as a verb than as a noun. Value is not something that objects *have,* but rather something that people *do.* While in ordinary discourse we sometimes speak of something as "having value," this is merely a manner of speaking which should not bewitch us into thinking that the object actually "possesses" that value in some metaphysical sense.

While values as such are not objective and do not inhere in objects, the properties which are valued may both be objective and inhere in objects. In the case of objects such as paper money, it is obvious that the properties which are valued are themselves entirely a matter of social construction (i.e., the value of money arises out of human agreement and not out of the intrinsic properties of the paper and ink). Given the kind of society we live in, it makes sense to value a hundred-dollar bill more highly than a sheet of paper from a memo pad. In the case of other objects, however, such as Vitamin C, the value arises out of the intrinsic properties of the object itself. To the extent that we are concerned about our health (to value one's health is itself a value, of course), it makes sense to value food which is high in nutritional value rather than food which is not. Values should not be confused with properties, however. It makes more sense to say that Vitamin C is/should be valued because of its intrinsic *properties* than to say that Vitamin C is/should be valued because of any intrinsic *value* it possesses.

The fact that Vitamin C contributes to human health because of its intrinsic properties is objectively the case, whether Vitamin C is consciously valued for doing so or not. This is what is usually meant when the claim is made that Vitamin C has objective, intrinsic value. It is important to see, however, that the claim about the relationship between Vitamin C and human health is factual, not a claim of value. The claim that humans should value Vitamin C because it contributes to health is only valid if it is the case that humans value their health; it cannot be

derived from the factual claim that Vitamin C contributes to human health. Hume's (1975, p. 469) contention that an "ought" cannot be derived from an "is" and Moore's (1971, p. 10) objections to the naturalistic fallacy, which holds that values can be derived from facts, both stand.

Values cannot be derived from facts any more than facts can be derived from values. This does not imply, however, that while facts are in some way "grounded" in reality, values are not. The naturalistic fallacy can be avoided—although not refuted—once we give up trying to derive values from facts and instead return to the same ontological reality which our conceptual and evaluative constructs are both responses to. In the same way that a distinction can be made between ontological reality and epistemological construction (reality as it is and reality as we conceptualize it), a distinction be made between ontological reality and value construction (reality as it is and reality as we value it). On the one hand, an object does not have properties which should be valued simply because we say it does, any more than something exists because we say it exists. On the other hand, an object may not be devoid of properties that should be valued simply because we are unaware of them, any more than something does not exist simply because we do not perceive it. Constructivism avoids idealism as well as realism in both its epistemology and its value theory.

While facts and values constitute two different ways of constructing our experience of the world, both are cognitive. We respond to objective phenomena not only by ordering it conceptually but also by reacting to it evaluatively. Objective reality provides the "raw material" out of which both facts and values are constructed. It is not that facts are objective while values are subjective, but rather that both arise out of human transactions with the world. The constructivist position thus puts facts and values on much the same plane: both are constructs and both are made in relation to an objective world.

It might be said that objects offer not only various "use affordances," as with Gibson (1979), but also various "value affordances." While the affordances themselves are real enough, they must nonetheless be cogni-

tively construed as having value before they become of use to us. The cognitive dimension of this view differs from the standard realist/objectivist position, which contends that values are *in* the world and that cognition is simply a matter of apprehending those values. Constructivists would instead argue that while the phenomena that are cognized are themselves objectively real, the question of how any given phenomenon is to be categorized is a matter of conceptual choice.

Thus, the fact that values and ethics are human constructs does not mean that they are "merely" subjective, as ethicists such as Mackie (1977) contend. From the constructivist point of view value is neither objective nor subjecttive but should rather be defined in relational terms: there are no values apart from either evaluating subjects or objects which are evaluated. Values are neither *in* the world nor *in* the mind, but rather arise out of the transaction between mind and the world. Values are, thus, neither completely "objective" nor completely "subjective," but rather "nonjective" (Routley and Routley 1980), which is another way of saying that they cannot exist independently from a relationship between an object which is valued and a valuing subject.

Putnam's contention that the world is "cold" and that "values (like colours) are projected on to the world, not discovered in it" (1993, p. 147) captures only half the story. The problem with this formulation is that it is entirely unidirectional: it accounts for how values are projected onto the world but ignores the fact that, from a relational, transactional perspective, what is in the world itself also causes us to value some things in some situations rather than others. While goodness and beauty cannot in themselves be regarded as the objective properties of natural phenomena, these phenomena may nonetheless have objective properties which we come to regard as good and beautiful. Moreover, not only does the world have an influence on what we value, but what we value also has an influence on what the world itself becomes in a very literal sense. The physical landscape itself is transformed if highways are more highly valued than wilderness areas, for example. There is, then, a further dialectical relationship between how the world is valued and how things objectively stand in the world.

Value is thus relational in the sense that it depends on an object's properties in relation to something else, not solely on properties that are intrinsic to the object itself. In the same way that reality underdetermines how we should think about it, so too reality underdetermines how we should value it. Constructivism is non-essentialist in contending that there is no single value which, because it metaphysically inheres in the object, tells what an object's value *really* is. In the same way that objects can be epistemologically construed in a variety of ways so too can they be valued in a variety of ways.

Lewis's (1946) typology, for example, distinguishes between utility, extrinsic, inherent, intrinsic, and contributive values. In Frankena's gloss, "A stick of wood may be useful in making a violin [utility value], a violin may be extrinsically good by being a means to good music [extrinsic value], the music may be inherently good if hearing it is enjoyable [inherent value], the experience of hearing it may be intrinsically good or valuable if it is enjoyable for its own sake [intrinsic value], and it may also be contributively good if it is part of a good evening or week end [contributive value]" (1967, p. 230). It can be noted parenthetically that the popular misconception that pragmatists are only concerned with instrumental values, and not other with values (including intrinsic values) is simply false.

An object, therefore, does not *have* value but rather *acquires* value by being valued in different ways. None of these values inhere in the object itself; rather, values emerge out of the transactions we have with an object and the expanded awareness of the object that we gain as a result of those transactions. Increased transactions with objective reality enable us to increase the range of our subjective experience. In the same way that we gain increased knowledge about the world by transacting with it, so too do we gain a greater sense of the various ways in which the world can be valued by transacting with it. The more classical music we listen to, for example, the better we are able to understand and appreciate it, as well as to discriminate between "good" and "bad" music; the same claim can be made for nearly everything we transact with in the world.

The constructivist approach to value is developmental in acknowledging an expanding awareness of the various ways in which the world and our experience of it can be valued. We are able to engage in a process of moral development or maturation in which we move from values which are relatively simple, self-centered, narrow in scope, uninformed, unreflected on, and unable to guide us through anything more than a limited range of situations to values that are complex, empathetic, broad in scope, intelligent, well-thought-through, and able to deal effectively with a wide variety of situations.

From a constructivist perspective, then, there is no Archimedean point on which value judgments and ethical principles can be grounded. A recognition of this fact should lead to neither disappointment nor skepticism, however. In Williams' (1985, p. 136) view, while science has fairly well-defined procedures for arriving at consensus about what the truth of a matter is because it is grounded on facts, ethics cannot be objective in the same way since there is nothing comparable on which it can be grounded. This contention is untenable, however. To the contrary, as we have argued, facts are as much a matter of a constructive activity as values are.

In many cases, values may even be prior to facts. In Dewey's words, "Things are objects to be treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured, even more than things to be known" (1929a, p. 21). It is only when our interest has been aroused by something that we are stimulated to gain more knowledge about it. Even in science, judgments about value (what to observe) precede judgments about facts (what is observed). This is not to say that science is therefore subjective and that it is impossible to give an objective account of "what is observed." The point is rather that value cannot, and should not, be eliminated from the scientific enterprise. Since our experience of the world is always partial and interest-laden, the breadth and depth of our knowledge is for the most part contingent upon the breadth and depth of our interests.

Indeed, ethics is not absolute, but then neither is science. We do not need a concept of "absoluteness" to secure our values and ethics. In Putnam's words,

... without the postulate that science "converges" to a single defi-
nite theoretical picture with a unique ontology and a unique set of
theoretical predicates, the whole notion of "absoluteness" collapses.
It is, indeed, the case that ethical knowledge cannot claim "abso-
luteness"; but that is because the notion of "absoluteness" is inco-
herent. Mathematics and physics, as well as ethics and history and
politics, show our conceptual choices; the world is not going to
impose a single language upon us, no matter what we choose to talk
about. (1993, p. 150)

It is possible to take the rejection of absoluteness in ethics as implying
that it is impossible to make value judgments across cultures, but for
Putnam, if it is possible to criticize, say, the Aztec belief in a god which
requires human sacrifice (an epistemological claim), it is also possible to
criticize the practice of human sacrifice itself (a value judgment). Value
constructs, as much as knowledge constructs, can be legitimately chal-
lenged precisely because they are constructs.

Relativists are skeptical about the possibility for resolving differences
between cultures precisely because they remain committed to the idea
that cross-cultural differences can *only* be resolved if there is a single
universal rationality which can be appealed to. In the relativist view,
since no single universal rationality exists, no method for resolving
differences is possible. Norms are internal to particular cultures and,
therefore, often incommensurable. Once, however, the notion of abso-
luteness has been abandoned, the ground on which the skeptic stands is
equally undermined. In the absence of a universal rationality why should
we simply fall back on a culturally relative notion of incommensurabil-
ity? Might not other options be available?

In the same way that a rejection of "absolute truth" does not lead to
an "anything goes" type of relativism with regard to epistemological con-
structs, neither does it lead us to an "anything goes" type of relativism
with regard to value constructs. If we do not see knowledge as making
linear progress towards convergence on ultimate truths, neither do we
need to see values or ethics as converging on a single set of ultimate

norms. Nonetheless, knowledge can still be regarded as becoming wider and more highly differentiated, as comprehending more phenomena, and as helping us to better adapt ourselves to the world. Knowledge of values and ethics can be seen in much the same way in that it helps us to appreciate more of what there is in the world, to deal with increasingly complex life-situations, and to lead richer and more fulfilling lives. The challenge to modern society is that we must learn to be as skillful at making judgments about values (ethically) as we have become at making judgments about facts (scientifically).

Constructivist ethics

Whereas value theory concerns itself with what should be valued in the world, ethics considers how we should act in the world. Constructivism sees humans as both biological organisms which respond to external stimuli and as social beings conditioned to think and behave in certain ways. Because human thought and behavior are never completely determined by either their biological or social circumstances, however, people inevitably must make choices about how to think and behave. The concern of ethics is with the quality of the choices that are made. Ethical constructivism can be defined as the process by which humans both individually and collectively determine which courses of action they will take and which principles they will use to govern the relations they have with each other, both within and between societies, and the relations they have with their natural environments. The process is not one of trying to *discover* what is "right" or "correct" on the basis of foundational principles, but rather one of trying to *create* effective ways of living, using whatever imagination and intelligence we have at our disposal. It is precisely because morality cannot be read directly out of nature that the principles which we take to guide our behavior must be *constructed*.

While some human behavior is instinctual and therefore to a large extent biologically determined, humans also have the capacity to make choices between alternative courses of action which natural laws themselves do not proscribe. This ability to choose rests on the human capacity to imaginatively foresee the consequences that will result from acting

in one way or another. The capacity to choose undoubtedly has adaptive significance because it enables humans to move beyond mere stimulus–response reactions, to consider a wider range of options, and thus to acquire a larger repertoire of behavior, some of which will prove adaptively superior to behavior based on mere reflex (Laszlo 1972, pp. 182ff).

Choice, as existentialists are fond of reminding us, is unavoidable. "Perhaps," Nietzsche writes, ". . . we should make no judgments at all; if one could only live without making estimations, without having likes and dislikes!" (1964, p. 47). Pure nihilism—the view that in principle no value judgments can be made—is an impossibility. To act is to choose one course of action out of many possible courses of action and to *ipso facto* exclude other courses of action. In the very act of making a choice one inevitably makes a value judgment that one course of action is better than another. Consistent nihilism, therefore, can only be achieved by ceasing to act. As Camus (1975) contends, the only way to escape the problem of choice is suicide, which itself is, of course, a choice. As long as we choose to continue living, which is itself a value judgment, we are confronted with the necessity of making further choices which involve making further value judgments.

As "self-interpreting animals" (Taylor 1985, chap. 2) humans unavoidably construct moral maps to help them distinguish between what is truly important to them and what is not. Such maps are made on the basis of what Taylor refers to as "strong evaluations," defined as ". . . distinctions between things which are recognized as of categoric or unconditioned or higher importance or worth, and things which lack this or are of lesser value" (1985, p. 3). How these maps are drawn will vary considerably from individual to individual and from culture to culture. The initial point which must be registered, however, is that it is impossible for us to avoid drawing such maps.

The question, then, is not *whether* value judgments should be made between various courses of action or not, but *how* such judgments should be made. Reasons can be given for choosing certain values, beliefs, and actions over others, and it is this that distinguishes constructivism from mere decisionism, i.e., the view that all choices are purely subjective and

therefore arbitrary. While any given situation presents us with a variety of ways in which it can be thought about and acted in, not all of these ways of thinking and acting will prove viable from the point of view of insuring our long-term survival. Nor will all ways of thinking and acting necessarily provide us with lives that are worth living or social and natural environments that are worth living in, even by the standards which we ourselves formulate. While we can certainly choose to create conditions which diminish our prospects for survival and a reasonable quality of life (collective suicide and ecocide are indeed real options), we can also choose, within the parameters of what the laws of biology and physics permit, among a variety of possibilities what we take to be a better life, good social systems, and good natural environments.

Ethical reflection

The reflective process. It is precisely because morality cannot be read directly out of nature that the principles which we take to guide our behavior must be *constructed.* The constructivist view sees ethics as arising out of what pragmatists call a "process of reflection" (Mead 1934, pp. 354–378; 1938, pp. 79–91; see also Dewey 1933), in which possible courses of action are both imaginatively proposed and critically evaluated. *Reflection* is an apt term, and preferable to *rationality*, precisely because it encompasses not only rational but also affective and imaginative modes of thought. It is the imaginative side of human experience which allows individuals to reflect back on their situation, formulate alternatives, and engage in behavior that leads to significant personal and social change.

Reflection arises out of dissatisfaction with the way things presently are. If we remain blissfully satisfied with how things stand there is little impetus for change. It is usually only when we perceive a problematic situation that our attention is engaged and we begin to think of ways to solve it. Ethical reflection begins from the belief that things can be otherwise. When our social systems are functioning in a "normal" way, there is little incentive for social change. It is usually only when, to use Kuhn's (2012) term, an *anomaly* occurs which the present system is

incapable of handling (social unrest, economic collapse, political upheaval, environmental degradation, etc.) that movements for social change are initiated. We recognize these anomalies as problems when, in Merton's words, ". . . there is a sizeable discrepancy between what is and what people think ought to be" (1976, p. 7; italics omitted).

The recognition of a discrepancy between "what is" and "what ought to be" can come about in at least three ways. The first occurs when individuals within particular cultures begin to rethink the norms and values of their own cultures. The ideas which the reflective process produces fuel the internal development of cultures. The second occurs when new ideas are imported into a society from outside, that is, through contact with other cultures. Other cultures have different ways of doing things, some of which might be preferable to our own. The third occurs when external circumstances change. As new problems arise, new solutions must be found.

Each of these situations brings us to new levels of awareness and encourages us to consider new possibilities which, while always potentially present, we may not have considered before. In Piagetian (Piaget 1985) terms, if these new possibilities cannot be assimilated into our existing schema systems, we will either fail to understand them or be required to accommodate them by enlarging our schemas. They represent disturbances to our habitual way of thinking and can therefore act as catalysts to reflective thinking. The purpose of reflective thought is, in Dewey's words ". . . to transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled, harmonious . . ." (1933, pp. 100–101; italics omitted).

The ontological realism embedded in the position we have outlined here would undoubtedly be challenged by social constructionists such as Spector and Kitsuse (2001), who contend, contra Merton, that our understanding of "what is" and "what ought to be" are always contestable. The aim of social science, in their view, should not be to study reality as it is but rather reality as it has been socially constructed. This claim is, of course, methodological rather than ethical and is reasonably

consistent with Weber's (1981) *Verstehen* method of sociological inquiry, which holds that sociology should concern itself not with the ultimate meanings of actions but rather with how actors define those meanings.

Social constructionists are by no means united on Spector and Kitsuse's program, however. Best (1993), while remaining in the constructivist camp, advocates a more realist position he calls "contextual construction-ism," which situates the claims of social actors in the actual cultural and social contexts they find themselves in. The question for Best is why an empirical discipline should limit itself only to the claims made by social actors and not also consider the evidence that is used to support these claims.

One of the most often quoted lines in the constructivist literature is the Thomas theorem: "If men [humans] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928, pp. 571–572). While it can be appreciated that there will always be various ways in which social groups can define the situation, it is still possible to agree with Best that the claims of social actors are only intelligible with refer-ence to the objective situations which their claims are responses to. Our objective situation exists independently of whatever thoughts we may have about it, and problems are adequately defined only when all of the relevant aspects of the objective situation have been taken into consider-ation. In Merton's revision of the Thomas theorem, ". . . if people do *not* define *real* situations as real, they are nevertheless real in their conse-quences" (1976, p. 22).

In our view, Spector and Kitsuse remain locked in a "spectator" the-ory of knowledge (see Dewey 1929b, chap. 1), which adopts the view-point of a cool, detached observer rather than the perspective of an actively engaged participant. Even if sociologists do decide, for method-ological reasons, to concern themselves not with "what is" and "what ought to be" but rather with how people define "what is" and "what ought to be," ethicists are obliged to do the reverse, taking the former rather than the latter as their points of departure. This means that ethics must concern itself with problems that arise out of human transactions with an objective world.

While none of our constructions ever completely capture the situation "as it is," some may nonetheless more adequately represent the situation than others. We need a "big-picture" view of the whole which simultaneously gives us a view of the relevant details in all their complexity. It is impossible, of course, for us to fully cognize any given situation. Since we can only be attentive to a small fraction of the various stimuli we encounter every day and must filter out a great deal of them simply to function, we are constantly in the process of making choices as to which stimuli we will attend to. Our attention is usually directed by our interests, and if our interests are too narrowly focused, our attention will be also—a situation which can lead us to dismiss as irrelevant stimuli that may be very relevant to our larger interests. The child is attentive to the ball that rolls on to the street but not to the sound of the oncoming car.

Attentiveness in the epistemological sense means attempting to comprehend as much of the "whole" of any given phenomenon as is possible. Attentiveness in the moral sense means being sensitive in as wide a way as possible to the full range of effects that our actions have on others and on the environments we inhabit. Effective ethical choices can be made only by taking all the relevant factors of our objective situation into consideration. A narrow, piecemeal approach, which lacks a "big-picture" perspective, can exacerbate rather than solve problems. Particular problems therefore need to be seen in as wide a context as possible, even if we inevitably fall short of the whole and never reach an "absolute" point of view. The attainment of intellectual and moral maturity thus involves expanding the scope of human consciousness and achieving a greater degree of objectivity. We do not acquire this kind of awareness by locking ourselves into our present understanding of reality but only by breaking through that understanding and confronting the objective situation as it is in itself. Agger, a critical theorist, writes, ". . . one might well argue that the most disabling social problems are those which remain outside the universe of consciousness and discourse altogether" (1993, p. 286). It is only when we are able to bring problems to the surface and face them directly that reflection actually begins.

Reflective morality. In the process of engaging in cross-cultural dia-

logue on values and ethics, the task is to achieve intersubjective agree-
ment with others with regard to what it is taken to be "good" in light of
the particular objective conditions we find ourselves in. This agreement
itself involves attempting to evaluate a multiplicity of conceptions of the
good. In the absence of coercion, persuasion is the only possible way to
give reasons in favor of one conception over another. The word *reasons*
refers here not only to rational arguments as such, but also to affective
and imaginative appeals. On the one hand, while nature does not deter-
mine precisely what our conceptions of the good will be, it does set
parameters on which conceptions will be viable. On the other hand,
while individual conceptions of what one takes to be one's own good
may be possible, conceptions of a good society or a good environment by
their very nature involve arriving at a shared conception of the good
with others, since it is not the individual alone who inhabits these social
or natural environments. Thus, our conception of a good society or a
good natural environment itself arises out of social dialogue. Such dia-
logue can take place not only within, but also between and among cul-
tures.

A distinction can be made between customary and reflective morality
(Dewey and Tufts 1936). The former judges the morality of acts against
the criteria of existing socially sanctioned ethical standards, which indeed
are variable from culture to culture. The latter questions the standards
themselves and arises when existing standards show themselves to be
inadequate in some way. The goal of reflective morality is not to arrive
at foundational ethical principles or norms, but rather to clarify the
problems faced and the various responses which are possible. It relies on
practical rather than apodictic forms of reasoning—that is, it makes
evaluative judgments between competing claims rather than trying to
formulate foundational claims. This process can also be described as dia-
lectical since it attempts to step outside of present configurations towards
a wider, more objective point of view rather than to ground ethics on
transcendental principles.

From a constructivist position, then, the point of ethical reflection is
not to reach an Archimedean point outside of culture but rather to

reflect back on norms which we already understand as being human creations, or constructs. Ethical reflection begins with the ability of individuals to question the particular values and norms they have been socialized into. As Frankena puts it,

> ... morality starts as a set of culturally defined goals and of rules governing achievement of the goals, which are more or less external to the individual and imposed on him or inculcated as habits. These goals and rules may and generally do, at least to some extent, become "internalized" and "interiorized," that is, the individual takes them as his own and regulates his own conduct by them; he develops a "conscience" or "superego." This process of internalization may be quite irrational. ... We may then, without leaving the moral fold, move from a rather irrational kind of inner direction to a more rational one in which we achieve an examined life and a kind of autonomy, become moral agents on our own, and even reach a point when we can criticize the rules and values of our society, as Socrates did in the *Apology* and the *Crito*. (1973, p. 8)

This passage parallels Kohlberg's (1981; 1984) notion that moral thinking is capable of moving from a conventional to a post-conventional mode. Existing cultural norms can always be questioned. Reflective morality challenges not only absolutist views of ethics, which are often little more than attempts to legitimate current social practices, but also the relativist notion that cross-cultural differences in values and norms must simply be accepted and never challenged. Any set of values and norms can be taken as the subject matter for ethical reflection.

It is precisely because ethical norms are human constructions that they can be subjected to critical reflection and modified. While it is possible for ethics to function merely as a means of legitimating the status quo, there is also a critical, subversive dimension to ethical reflection that questions the status quo. Ethics in this view is not only imaginative and creative but also disruptive and revolutionary—quite the opposite of the popular view which associates ethics with "do-good," conventional moralizing. Although individuals are influenced by the societies they live in

and never completely "free to do what they want," they nonetheless have a measure of power to influence and change those societies in return.

It is possible, of course, that ethical reflection will destroy moral knowledge already embedded in cultural traditions (Williams 1985, p. 148). In some cases, the result may be positive, since changes in ethical norms allow cultures to evolve. In the past some cultures had norms supporting human sacrifice; now there are norms which prohibit it. In other cases, however, the destruction of moral norms may be negative, particularly when no new norms are constructed to take their place.

Indeed, the threat of moral nihilism can be so severe that some people may conclude that only certain moral knowledge, of the absolute, foundational, and universal kind, can save them, leading to a fear of revolutionary change and even more entrenched support for the status quo. As Frankena writes, "Some find too much anxiety in this transition and try to 'escape from freedom' in one way or another . . . [and] . . . some apparently can make the transition only with the help of psychoanalysis . . ." (1973, p. 8). Indeed, there can a considerable amount of psychological resistance to the prospect of destroying existing ethical norms and replacing them with new norms that are unfamiliar.