The Construction of Values
and Ethics Across Cultures—Part 2

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Article

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Introductory note

This paper is the second of a two-part series, which offers a constructivist theory of values and ethics from an intercultural perspective. Part 1, published separately, 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 here, 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.

Ethics as art

The role of imagination in ethics. Ethical responsibility implies being able to choose between alternative courses of action, and this seems to be a uniquely human characteristic. We are not preprogrammed to act in a certain way, but within the parameters of what is physically and biologically possible we are able to make choices. Choice arises out of the human ability to imagine different possible futures. The ability to engage in creative change is possible precisely because we are able to construe ourselves and the world differently from how we have construed them in the past. We can imagine states of affairs that would be preferable in some way to those which exist at present and can act in ways that will help to bring about those states of affairs. One task of eth-

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ics, then, is to both envision and evaluate such states of affairs.

Reflective morality involves both a critical dimension (in which exist-
ing states of affairs can be critiqued) and an imaginative dimension (in
which various courses of action can be mentally considered before being
actually implemented). The two modes of thought are in fact interde-
pendent. Johnson writes, "Our ability to criticize a moral view depends
on our capacity for imagining alternative viewpoints on, and solutions to,
a particular moral problem" (1993, p. 203). The moral imagination thus
has an "exploratory function" (Kekes 1993, p. 106). While we cannot be
perpetual revolutionaries, neither need we cling unflinchingly to cultural
ideals which may, upon examination, turn out to be less than the best we
are capable of. Better alternatives can always be proposed.

Imaginative constructs, as much as epistemological and value con-
structs, have their limitations: we are not able to imagine all possible
alternatives and, moreover, the cultures we live in limit to some extent
the range of what it is possible for us to imagine. One way to increase
the scope of our moral imagination is to become acquainted with possi-
bilities other than those that exist in our own respective traditions.
Through the development of a historical perspective and an understand-
ing of other cultures we come to appreciate that those conventions which
prevail at our own moment in history and in our own culture do not
exhaust the possibilities of life. Imagination thus allows us to transcend
habitual patterns of behavior and current social arrangements, and to
make conscious choices about how we will live and what kind of society
we will create. Transcendence in this sense does not mean the search for
an otherworldly source of absolute values, but rather the this-worldly
struggle to go beyond present configurations and achieve greater objec-
tivity. Transcendence, so defined, is the ability to imagine new possibili-
ties which do not yet exist.

The ability to imagine new possibilities for ourselves and our societies
increases the scope of our freedom. Moral nihilists, who take an indiffer-
ent attitude towards the choices they make, presume themselves "free"
but in fact limit their opportunities by simply reacting to immediate sit-
uations rather than actively shaping situations to their own purposes.

Rather than control circumstances, circumstances control them. The refusal to engage in imaginative reflection diminishes the ability of individuals to create better lives for themselves and, moreover, to challenge the tyranny of culturally imposed values which inhibit rather than advance personal freedom. Freedom cannot be realized by simply going along with the flow of events but only by formulating a clear conception of how one would really like to live one's life. This involves adopting specific goals for oneself and then determining what courses of action best help one reach those goals. The constructivist position, far from promoting moral nihilism, in fact promotes the values of freedom, responsibility, and tolerance (Watzlawick 1984), i.e., freedom to choose how the world will be understood and acted in, responsibility for making these choices wisely, and tolerance in the sense of keeping an open mind towards choices which are different from our own.

The pragmatic tradition has long acknowledged the role of imagination in ethics, as the following passage from Dewey and Tufts indicates:

> Deliberation is actually an imaginative rehearsal of various courses of conduct. We give way, in our mind, to some impulse; we try, in our mind, some plan. Following its career through various steps, we find ourselves in imagination in the presence of the consequences that would follow: and as we then like and approve, or dislike and disapprove, these consequences, we find the original impulse or plan good or bad . . . . The advantage of a mental trial, prior to the overt trial . . . is that it is retrievable, whereas overt consequences remain. They cannot be recalled. Moreover, many trials may mentally be made in a short time. The imagining of various plans carried out furnishes an opportunity for many impulses which at first are not in evidence at all, to get under way. (1936, p. 303)

The ability to imagine possible futures through simulation avoids the time-consuming strategy of trial and error.

Whereas the cognitive side of constructivist thought concerns itself with evaluating present states of affairs (the world as it is), the non-cognitive side concerns itself with possible future states of affairs (the world

as it might be). Arbib and Hesse (1986, p. 60) contend that while scientific schemas are constrained by the pragmatic criterion of truth, other schemas may be non-empirical. Glasersfeld concurs:

> With regard to conceptual learning, I want to stress a feature that is rarely discussed. Once experiential elements can be re-presented and combined to form hypothetical situations that have not actually been experienced, it becomes possible to generate thought experiments of all kinds. They may start with simple questions, such as: what would happen if I did this or that? And they may regard the most sophisticated abstract problems of physics and mathematics. Insofar as their results can be applied and lead to viable outcomes in practice, thought experiments constitute what is perhaps the most powerful learning procedure in the cognitive domain. (1995, pp. 68–69)

For the verificationist (e.g., Ayer 1946, chap. 6), since non-empirical constructs are not grounded in fact they are purely emotive. For the constructivist, however, non-empirical constructs do not describe, but are rather catalysts for bringing about objective states of affairs. Lovibond (1983) captures this dimension well in her book, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics*. Adopting a Wittgensteinian stance, which sees moral values as grounded in particular forms of life, Lovibond acknowledges that individuals can become alienated from these forms of life, but then asks how rational dissent is possible once people have been socialized into a particular moral discourse. She answers this question by suggesting that expressive and imaginative language allows us to use familiar concepts to promote unfamiliar courses of action. Lovibond recognizes that

> ... by encouraging the imaginative exploration of social experience, geared to discovering novel moral aspects of situations and thus achieving a more adequate grasp of moral reality, the philosopher is sowing the seeds of a critical tendency which he [or she] cannot undertake to control: the tendency towards a state of affairs in

which the "moral fabric" of the community is perpetually being demolished and rebuilt. (1983, p. 192)

Without an "activist theme" we are condemned to " . . . unending commerce with the 'familiar objects' of thought" (1983, p. 195).

Since Lovibond adopts a realist approach to ethics, she labors over the problem of how to square imaginings about a future which does not yet exist with cognitive judgments about present and past actions. Her argument is that while the verificationist may challenge the speculative nature of imaginative thought, " . . . as competent users of language in general . . . we are able to speculate about putative states of affairs which obtain (if at all) beyond our awareness . . . " (1983, p. 196). With this statement Lovibond moves beyond her intended realism, however, towards a position which is very close to Kelly's view that constructs involve both actual and possible states of affairs. Kelly's approach " . . . looks for what [humans] can do that [they have] never done before, rather than for conclusive explanations for what [humans have] been doing all the time . . . " (Kelly 1969, p. 144; see also pp. 66–93). Our constructs not only enable us to see the world differently but also to invent entirely new possibilities.

Goal-directed behavior and "guiding visions." Ethical reflection in the constructivist view does not concern itself with formulating absolute and universal ethical principles but rather with working out a conception of what is the "best" situation for ourselves, our societies, and the environment, given the specific geographical–historical context we find ourselves in. The reflective process is itself situated in specific cultural and environmental contexts and does not seek to transcend those contexts in the hope of formulating universal "truths" based on foundational, apodictic forms of rationality. Rather, it is the process by which we are able to reflect back on our current situation, assess its worth, and, if necessary, change it. Recognizing that our ethical ideas cannot be foundationally grounded but are humanly "constructed" does not imply that they are purely arbitrary. Our purpose in constructing them is the pragmatic one of fashioning lives for ourselves that are worth living, and societies and

environments that are worth living in. Simply put, the reflective process is the relatively modest attempt to apply whatever intelligence we can muster to the choices we make. There is nothing that *compels* us to choose one course of action over another, but some courses of action may nonetheless be demonstrably better than others. Decisions which are informed, well-reasoned, and empathetic are preferable to those which are uninformed, irrational, and callous. Dewey's view is commendable on this point: "To claim that intelligence is a better method than its alternatives, authority, imitation, caprice and ignorance, prejudice and passion, is hardly an excessive claim" (1929a, pp. 353–354).

While the reflective process should not be confused with apodictic forms of rationality, neither should it be confused with purely instrumental forms of rationality. Despite the fact that pragmatism is often misunderstood as being exclusively concerned with "means," a concern for "ends" is in fact an integral part of the pragmatic approach to ethics. Dewey and Tufts write, for example, "There can . . . be no such thing as reflective morality except where [persons] seriously ask by what purposes they should direct their conduct and why they should do so; what it is which makes their purposes good" (1936, pp. 197–198). The reflective process does not simply take certain goals as "given," but rather actively engages itself in the process of choosing those goals. It is not only concerned with making rational choices within a given system but also with the rationality of the system itself.

The goals we choose as individuals and societies will be more realizable and qualitatively better if they are the product of considered choice on the part of the individual and reasoned debate on the part of societies. Such goals are necessary because they give direction and purpose to action. MacIntyre links such goals to the idea of narrative unity, of being able to see events not simply as a string of unrelated activities but as hanging together in meaningful ways:

> We live out our lives, both individually and in our relationships
> with each other, in the light of certain conceptions of a possible
> shared future, a future in which certain possibilities beckon us for-

ward and others repel us, some seem already foreclosed and others perhaps inevitable. There is no present which is not informed by some image of some future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a *telos*—or of a variety of ends or goals—towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present. Unpredictability and teleology therefore coexist as part of our lives; like characters in a fictional narrative we do not know what will happen next, but nonetheless our lives have a certain form which projects itself towards our future. Thus the narratives which we live out have both an unpredictable and a partially teleological character. If the narrative of our individual and social lives is to continue intelligibly—and either type of narrative may lapse into unintelligibility—it is always both the case that there are constraints on how the story can continue and that within those constraints there are indefinitely many ways that it can continue. (1985, pp. 215–216)

The *telos* referred to here is not a strictly Aristotelian one, which sees life as moving towards predetermined ends, but rather a constructivist one, which sees purpose as arising out of the interplay between objective circumstances and subjective aspirations.

Precisely because nature does not tell us how to think or act, there is the need to construct the goals which we, as both individuals and societies, aim to achieve. Such goals can be referred to as "guiding visions" (Midgley, chap. 3). Rescher similarly describes ethical ideals as " . . . thought constructions that we superimpose on the messy realities of this world to help us find our way about" (1987, p. 119). Such ideals can in turn be evaluated by the pragmatic criterion of how well they contribute to human well-being: "The validation and legitimation of ideals accordingly lie not in their (infeasible) *applicability* but in their *utility* for directing our efforts—their productive power in providing direction and structure to our evaluative thought and pragmatic action" (1987, p. 141).

Guiding visions are thus higher-order schemas which function to give our behavior and projects both purpose and direction. They can also be

described as the images we have of ourselves and of society as we would hope them to be, the constructed *telos* which we see ourselves as working towards. If no goals are articulated, action becomes random and purposeless (although there is room, of course, for certain types of random and purposeless activity, such as play).

Ethics can be seen in this light as the art of fashioning a life for ourselves and the societies we live in. Kekes writes, "We make our lives the way artists make works of art" (1993, p. 29). The kind of world we live in will to a large extent be the kind of world we are able to create for ourselves, given the external constraints of our natural environments and the internal constraints of our own skills and initiative. If the world is to be beautiful, rewarding, and meaningful, it will be because we have fashioned it to be so. We are also responsible if the world we fashion is ugly, demeaning, and purposeless. We do not only fashion ourselves but also the societies we live in.

The use of imagination in ethics might be criticized on the ground that since it is impossible to test the viability of states of affairs that do not yet even exist, imaginative constructs are purely subjective and, therefore, mere flights of fancy that have no grounding in reality. From a dialectical perspective, however, how humans subjectively think about the world influences what the world itself objectively becomes; guiding visions, therefore, are best described as being neither subjective nor objective, but rather as standing at the intersection between what we subjectively aspire to as historically situated human beings and what it is objectively possible for us to achieve within the parameters of those situations. The significance of guiding visions becomes clear once one adopts an ethics of *becoming* rather than merely an ethics of *being*. Given what we *are*, what might we *become?* What kind of future can be created out of our present situation, in light of both its limitations and its unrealized possibilities?

Ethics as science

Utopian realism. Guiding visions can be both intra- and intercultural. They are not metanarratives in Lyotard's (1984) sense, nor can they be

regarded as historical, teleological inevitabilities in the fashion of Hegel or Marx. It is precisely because there is no teleological end which all humanity is moving towards that guiding visions must be constructed. While such visions are imaginative and "utopian" they must nonetheless be based on a realistic assessment of what is actually achievable, a position Giddens (1990, pp. 154ff.) refers to as "utopian realism."

In addition to "divergent" thinking, which involves brainstorming and the imaginative exploration of various alternatives, regardless of their ultimate viability, we also need to employ "convergent" thinking, which is concerned with whether or not the possibilities we come up with will actually work (see Hampden-Turner 1981, pp. 104–107). Kekes (1993) makes a similar distinction when he suggests that the moral imagination not only has an exploratory function (corresponding to divergent thinking) but also a corrective function (corresponding to convergent thinking). The corrective function is concerned with the " ... discrepancy between what [it is] reasonable to believe about our possibilities and what we actually [believe] about them" (1993, p. 110). The moral imagination goes wrong when it substitutes fantasies about the future for genuine possibilities and deceives itself into thinking that those fantasies can actually be realized.

Guiding visions must be achievable in principle even if they are not always achieved in practice. An ability to imagine viable alternatives is dependent upon an accurate assessment of the actual possibilities that our objective situation makes available to us. Empirical knowledge is indispensable in this respect. Nonetheless, judgments about facts, which are the province of science, cannot be confused with judgments about actions, which are the province of ethics. Science can only define the parameters of the possible; it cannot tell us what to do within those parameters. The predictive power of science concerns itself with the likely future effects of present actions, while ethics concerns itself with choosing those actions which produce the most desirable effects.

Human action can thus be described as taking place within three sets of limits, or parameters: (1) the parameters set by the physical laws of nature; it is impossible for humans to act in ways that violate the laws of

nature; (2) the parameters set by ethics; among the various ways in which it is possible for humans to act, some can be regarded as "better" than others; and (3) the parameters set by a given culture; among the ethical ways in which it is possible to act, some cultures will regard some ways of acting as more desirable than others. It is acknowledged that exactly where each of these parameters—the natural, ethical, and the cultural—should be drawn is not self-evident and that our understanding of them is socially mediated. Nonetheless, it can be accepted that there is not one but rather a plurality of different ways in which it is possible to be ethical. We are not obliged simply to "submit to nature" nor to "conform to society" since, as we have argued, neither nature nor society fully *determines* individual action. Guiding visions are nonetheless constrained by whether or not they are objectively achievable, ethical in relation to others, and desirable in terms of the images of the future they present us with.

Ethics as problem-solving. The problems we begin with constrain what can count as legitimate solutions and which forms of action can be considered appropriate and inappropriate. This is not to say that the problems themselves *determine* what our responses will or should be, but rather that the nature of the problems themselves circumscribe from the outset the kinds of solutions that can offered. Solutions must be structured in particular ways if the problems are to be solved. It is unlikely, however, that there will ever be only one possible solution to any given problem. Kelly writes,

> [A theory] must conform to events in order to predict them. The number of alternative ways of conforming are, as far as we know, infinite, but discriminable from the infinite number of ways which do not conform. A person is to cut a pie. There is an infinite number of ways of going about it, all of which may be relevant to the task. If the pie is frozen, some of the usual ways of cutting the pie may not work—but there is still an infinite number of ways of going about it. (1963, p. 19)

There can thus be a legitimate pluralism with regard to how problems

are solved. In Kelly's view there is no reason to suspect total convergence on a "universal system of constructs." On the contrary we have to " . . . content ourselves with a series of miniature systems, each with its own realm or limited range of convenience" (1963, p. 10). It is possible to view the same events in the context of more than one system, yet, as Kelly writes, the events themselves " . . . do not belong to any system" (1963, p. 12).

There is in principle, then, no limit to the number of viable solutions that can be proposed to any given problem. Kelly contends that any science which accords finality to its conclusions performs a disservice. Proposed solutions can be cast in what Kelly (1969, pp. 147–162) refers to as an "invitational" rather than a declarative mood: what would the world be like if we adopted these, rather than some other, goals to guide our behavior? Consistent with his "man-the-scientist" metaphor (the view that all humans are in some sense scientists), Kelly regards such proposals as hypotheses subject to experimentation. The experimental method advocated by Dewey and Tufts also holds that any generalization " . . . should be a hypothesis, not a dogma; something to be tried and tested, confirmed and revised in future practice; having a constant point of growth instead of being closed" (1936, p. 381). For Kelly hypothetical thinking allows us to "transcend the obvious" and entertain novel ideas, while realizing that such ideas are, initially at least, only "make-believe" (1969, pp. 147–162). In considering various options for future action we are able to " . . . forecast the events of the future in the rich context of all else that may be possible" (1969, p. 7). Human behavior becomes more meaningful when it is seen against the background of the alternatives not chosen.

By combining Kelly's "man-the-scientist" metaphor with a pragmatic account of the reflective process (Dewey's "experimental method"), we can suggest a model for ethical dialogue which is not unlike that of scientific investigation. Science aims at a comprehensive view of reality but realizes that this view cannot be achieved by quick metaphysical "solutions." Rather, it involves a painstaking step-by-step journey of exploration and discovery, which results not in absolute truth but in a more

highly differentiated and integrated understanding of reality. In ethics as well we can aim to achieve as highly differentiated and integrated a view of our possibilities as we are able to, while rejecting any quick-fix ethical formulas (or dogmatic pronouncements) that appear universal but offer only a partial understanding of what those possibilities may be. Ethical hypotheses, in this model, can be tested in much the same way that scientific hypotheses are tested. We perceive a problem, define it, formulate imaginative hypotheses for resolving it, gather all the relevant data available, and test our hypotheses against experience. If the visions we propose do not work, we revise them.

Constructivism and intercultural ethics

In applying these ideas to cross-cultural dialogue on ethics, it can be noted that the ethical systems humans create to deal with the problems they face vary tremendously from culture to culture. Even within cultures there can be a variety of competing systems. No system is complete, however; each system may be able to solve some types of problems but not others. Since each of the systems found in particular cultures has a limited range of convenience, the range can be significantly extended by considering how problems can be approached from the standpoint of different systems. This process not only exposes us to different ideas and ways of doing things but can also stimulate us to *generate* entirely new ideas and ways of doing things. To the extent that problems exist across cultures, they can also be discussed across cultures.

A constructivist approach to intercultural ethics sees ethics as arising out of particular historical and cultural situations. In contrast to foundational approaches, which attempt to ground ethics in universal, immutable, and ahistorical principles, constructivism argues for a more pragmatic approach, which sees the development of moral codes as practical solutions to specific problems arising in particular socio-historical contexts. Whereas foundational approaches start with a given set of principles and then proceed to apply these principles to concrete situations, the constructivist approach does the reverse: it begins by looking at the problems presented in concrete situations and then proceeds to look

for—or construct—solutions to these problems. Theorizing follows rather than precedes the solutions which are proposed to solve these problems.

From this pragmatic perspective, the function of ethics is to help people successfully transact both with each other and with the world. As social practices or environmental conditions change, the old norms lose their validity and new norms must be constructed. Ethical formulations can thus be seen as evolving in response to changing social and environmental circumstances. In societies which do not have the institutions of property or monogamous marriage, for example, there is no need to establish "commandments" against stealing or adultery. But once property and marriage have become established as social institutions, the need arises to construct rules which govern those institutions. Norms against stealing and adultery are neither God-given nor "natural" but socially constructed, and it is only within the matrix of a particular social structure that a norm gains force. Moral statements can only be judged as right or wrong within the context of a particular moral scheme; they cannot be true in any absolute sense.

A constructivist approach to intercultural ethics contends that as new problems arise, entirely new norms can be created to deal with them. While we may not have to start entirely from scratch, it is also true that we often cannot simply rely on the traditions of the past to guide us. Entirely new ways of thinking about ethics can emerge through the creative imagining of new possibilities. Recognizing this emergent quality of ethics upends the foundational/universalist notion that ethical norms are absolute and unchangeable (or that they must be absolute and unchangeable if they are to be ultimately valid). A universal, absolute, and unchanging ethic is simply too inflexible to handle new situations effectively, and ultimately reactionary because it assumes that an ethic which in fact has been created in a specific time and place to deal with specific social and environmental circumstances can be extended to all times and places, and thus to all social and environmental circumstances. Absolutist theories, by their very nature, are unable to adapt themselves to changing circumstances. Relativist approaches are no better, however; in their

refusal to subject existing cultural norms to critical reflection they often prove to be equally inflexible.

Cross-cultural dialogue on ethics is important because it enables us to work out the specific principles and norms that will govern relations between cultures. Cross-cultural encounters create entirely new social situations which may be highly anomic in the sense that there may be few, if any, already-agreed-upon customs, norms, or precedents for the participants to fall back upon. The cultural norms we initially bring with us to cross-cultural encounters tell us how to deal with people from our own culture, not with people from another culture whose norms are different. In many cases entirely new ethical frameworks will need to be negotiated through a process of cross-cultural dialogue which draws on, but does not remain bound by, the ethical insights contained in any one tradition. Reaching agreement requires a dialectical process of reflection in which the participants attempt to critique existing ethical principles and norms, to integrate positive features of those principles and norms in new ways, and to create entirely new principles and norms to effectively deal with the new cross-cultural situations.

Since the rules necessary to govern cross-cultural transactions do not yet exist, they can only be created—or *constructed*—through a dialogical process in which, ideally, everyone involved is given an equal opportunity to participate. It is insufficient for one group to simply force its own norms on other groups or for one group to uncritically adopt the norms of another because the relationship between the groups would then be based on domination and control, i.e., the imposition/acceptance of one view to the exclusion of other potentially better views. Dialogue allows all potentially good views to receive a fair hearing and thus enables the groups to find ways of transacting with each other that are mutually satisfactory and sufficient for joint action on mutually shared problems. Dialogue itself may not be able to resolve all problems, of course, but the alternative to dialogue is a situation in which relationships between the groups deteriorate or their mutually shared problems remain unresolved.

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