

Construction of Ethics: doorway to a Higher Pragmatism

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An address to a graduate course at the National University of Rosario,
in Rosario, Argentina, 2006

PEACE EDUCATION BOOKS



Description: The construction of ethics is a more credible account of how peace, which is vital and moral is within our reach. The construction of ethics is a more acceptable creed than Kant's because it has a firmer grounding in the way in which ethics functions in human life. It has more credibility than political realism because it has firmer basis in the causal powers, which social scientists find operative in society. Moreover, it offers a theory-based methodology for building a sustainable peace and justice. The practices of the construction of ethics are guided by the premise that ethics, or norms, are the basis from which society forms. Thus, improving society means improving norms, or, to use an idiom more apt to social science: social structures are cultural structures, and cultural structures are normative.

Keywords: agape, ahimsa, categorical imperative, causal powers, contract rights, conventional morality, critical realism, cultural action, cultural structures, economics, Enlightenment, ethics, *Foundations of Metaphysics of Morals*, freedom, war, language game, moral and intellectual reform, moral law, nonviolence, norms, political realism, postmodernism, power, pragmatism, premise, revealed reference, right action, social democracy, social reconstruction, social structures, society, WTO

In 1795, Immanuel Kant predicted that the day would come when the ever-increasing horrors of war would demonstrate the need to establish peace; the day Kant predicted is now upon us; he asserted that once the consciousness for the need to establish peace arrived via the horrors of war and crisis then humanity would mobilize toward and focus upon peace. Peace might come about via a series of collective decisions to follow the moral law, which Kant believed every rational mature being understood; moreover, he recognized moral law as essential to the legal principles governing a market economy. The only principles he cites in his *Foundations of Metaphysics of Morals* as examples of strict categorical imperatives are 1) property rights, 2) contract rights, and 3) freedom.

Kant's system of precepts is a major part of today's liberal-institutional school of thought in international relations; furthermore, his thought is a direct ancestor of the democratic peace theories, which the Clinton and both Bush administrations endorsed and declared as the guides to their policies.

18th century ideals, such as Kant's, resound in today's public statements of the World Trade Organization, the WTO, which describes its trade liberalization agenda as an engine of peace which promotes respect for all persons. Sadly, Kant's philosophy erred in its choice of the *normative principles*, which would work to create justice and peace. The process of building a lasting global peace fails with the use of a philosophy that regards strict respect for property rights as a categorical imperative.

Such a philosophy forms the basis a world split into bifurcated worlds of the haves and the have-nots. However, those who call themselves political realists (e.g., Hans Morgenthau) criticize the Kantian and all liberal approaches to peace building because Kant did specify the correct normative principles. Instead, the critical realist denies the causal efficacy of ethics in general—any ethics—and asserts the causal efficacy of something they say is not ethics, but rather something else, often known as power.

The theory of a construction of ethics presents a more credible account of how peace, which, again, all rational beings agree is vital and moral, can become possible and within our reach. The construction of ethics is a more acceptable creed than Kant's because it has a firmer grounding in the way in which ethics actually functions in human life. It has more credibility than the so-called political realism because it has firmer basis in the causal powers, which social scientists and psychologists actually find operative in society.

Moreover, the construction of ethics offers a theory-based methodology for building sustainable peace and justice. The practices of a construction of ethics are guided by the premise that ethics, or norms, are the basis from which society forms. Thus, improving society means improving norms, or, to use an idiom more apt to social science: social structures are cultural

structures, and cultural structures are normative.

Once established, this premise of a construction of ethics is, by definition, the way to peace because, again, an advanced ethics improves society. Conclusions about the construction of ethics that follow naturally from a critical realist ontology and epistemology include:

- Paulo Freire's concept: peace building is cultural action
- Antonio Gramsci's view of peace building as moral and intellectual reform, and John Dewey's sense of social reconstruction.

I will now don a postmodern hat, and take several imaginary steps backward (the better to survey my position from outside myself and the better to deconstruct my own discourse). Let us highlight some key terms: premise, ethics and society.

The premise: ethics is society is not a premise, which states an abstract fact supposed to be always true such as Euclid's postulate: all right angles are equal to one another starts a chain of reasoning with a principle for constructing further links of the chain, as Peano premised that for every natural number— n —there was a successor number: $n + 1$ states a fact from which a conclusion follows, as for example from the premise that black swans exist in Australia it follows that the statement "All swans are white" is false, and derives from the common meanings of words, as one might say the word meanings are premises of Bertrand Russell's assertion that—true—a bachelor is an unmarried male.

Ethics is society is a premise in the sense that I begin my theory by saying first that ethics are the basis from which society forms. I assert that this act of speaking, uttering this phrase, will contribute to building a world of sustainable peace and justice. I choose this act of speaking, and I recommend that you speak in this manner as well. John Searle adapted the idea of speech acts from Ludwig Wittgenstein's more basic notion of language-game.

One can regard speech acts and the playing of language games, as Wittgenstein said: as events in the natural history of the human species. I would claim that when people choose to talk of social and economic issues in terms of how best to promote and improve ethical norms, those sorts of dialogues are desirable events in the natural history of the species.

This premise claims to have helpful consequences; it does not claim to be true. However, one reason it is helpful is that it brings into focus a great number of facts, which are true. With the keyword premise defined, I now turn to the keywords ethics and society, which have complex histories and many synonyms. Among the synonyms, I include quasi-synonyms, which do not exactly match: they overlap and do much of the same work. Of the two words, *ethics* is by far the oldest. Aristotle treated both politics and education as subsets of ethics. The concept of

economics was a footnote to politics: a subset within another subset of ethics.

Aristotle was typical of Western thinkers, which were not in this respect different from Confucius or many other Eastern thinkers, for whom the key question was repeatedly—What is right action and the right thing to do?

Raymond Williams, a leading cultural historian, noted that the word *society* did not appear until the 18th century. Michel Foucault noted that this 18th century discourse created the entity that it was talking about, namely: society. This recent entity: society soon became the object of study of social science; therefore, once invented, and once made an object of study by professional explainers, the term *society* had to have analysis and explanation. When one reads the classic and contemporary texts in social science, one finds the explanation of society by such terms as:

norms	functional and dysfunctional
relations of production	conventions
relations	stories
customs	institutions
habitus	social structures
rules	rituals
positions	roles
practices	

In other words, social science explains society with ethics, by ethics, and as ethics. What the items in the list of synonyms I just read have in common is that they all draw on notions used to guide behavior. One good ancient name for such notions is ethics. I do not say that all of the synonymous terms, such as norms and institutions should go out of circulation, and that henceforth social scientists should only use the term ethics. Nonetheless, whatever reasons others may have for talking in the manner they do, I am encouraged to talk as I do by the near-equivalence of my terminology to the standard vocabularies of social science.

I do say that making up norms and rules to guide social life is a natural activity of humans.

Complaining when somebody has done somebody wrong, ranting and criticizing, praising and blaming, and participating in endless conversations about rights and wrongs are natural activities of the human species— just as the building of nests is a natural activity of most bird species.

I agree with Clifford Geertz that culture is the ecological niche of the human species, and adding that culture is centrally about norms. Nevertheless, let us not forget that other kind of social scientist, the so-called political realist, who explains social phenomena by means of something, which is explicitly not ethics, not a set of norms, but something often called *power*.

Leo Tolstoy in some ways was one of them; he wrote that the upper classes only imagine that their privileges derive from the science of jurisprudence and the laws of economics. In fact, as Paulo Freire, Betty Reardon and others besides Tolstoy have also noted that our privileges rest on violence, the war system and on its domestic equivalents. That is half true, the other half of the truth is that the science of jurisprudence and the laws of economics are themselves at least as dysfunctional as war, if we define a functional system as Buckminster Fuller did: one that works for one-hundred percent of humanity without ecological damage.

The construction of ethics is concerned with both halves of the problem that Tolstoy described: replacing violence with nonviolence and transforming law and economics so that they follow, every day increasingly, the principle of agape, which is to say, translating the Greek principles of welcome, inclusion and the sisterhood and brotherhood of all.

The construction of ethics applies the philosophy of critical realism. It is *realist* because it grounds social science firmly into the natural sciences of which it is a member. It is *critical* because it rejects social reality as it is by deconstructing and reconstructing it. Therefore, as a helpful consequence, the construction of ethics does not reject the many constructed social realities that history and anthropology describe. The construction of ethics holds as valuable and necessary the positive aspects of the many religions, myths, rituals, music and/or art cultures, ethnic traditions, psychologies, and pedagogies that the human species has invented. Given the historical record, we have no reason to be optimistic about human nature. We need all the cultural resources we can get in order to transform an animal with strong anti-social tendencies into a pro-social animal. Descartes erred, writing that

The endless debates of ancient philosophers about virtue, debates that never came to any generally agreed conclusion, should be terminated, and replaced by sciences built on foundations of clear and distinct ideas.

On the contrary, those endless dialogues about rights and wrongs that Descartes disparaged are inseparable from the ecological niche of the species. The preservation and further construction of spiritual communities constantly renegotiating ethical conventions are natural human activities—natural like nest building. In saying that we cannot afford to lose any cultural resources from any tradition, I am not saying different traditions mean the same things. I am saying they often do the same things.

When a Christian says *agape*, and a Comtean positivist says *humanity* while a Marxist says *society producing for itself*, as an economist says *revealed preference* and a Muslim says that God is sovereign on the Day of Judgment, and a Gandhian says *ahimsa*—thus, we do not all mean the same thing. Nevertheless, diverse speech acts performed in diverse cultures may

have the same desirable consequences. Players of different language games may do the same thing, even though they do not mean the same thing. Each of these words or phrases may feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, provide housing for the homeless, free the prisoners, cheer up people who are depressed, resolve conflicts, make sacred cooperative relationships, welcome the newborn into the world, and honor the dead with a decent burial.

Another helpful consequence, perhaps the most helpful one, of talking in terms of a construction of ethics is that it is an umbrella vocabulary applying equally to modern and non-modern culture. It denies Max Weber's distinction, which defined modern Westerners as rational, and everyone else as customary. Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and the postmodern tribe generally have arrived for their own reasons and in their own ways at a similar result. They have deconstructed the Enlightenment. Thanks to these and other postmodernists, it is no longer intellectually respectable to say that whereas earlier people and non-Western people were and are superstitious, embracing belief-systems with no rational grounds, modern Western liberals are different.

Friedrich Nietzsche in the 19th century was a precursor of the postmodernists in that he too shattered the pretension of modernity to have found, at last, a rational basis for ethics. Nietzsche seemed to take pleasure in driving home the point that God was dead, and as a consequence Man, and also Woman, were dead too. Thus, if nothing is sacred, then respect for the dignity of every person is not sacred. Nietzsche and the ethical relativism of the postmodernists appall many scholars who, thus, cling to Enlightenment humanism for the same reasons Richard Rorty clings to it, even though he has demonstrated logically that it has no rational basis. That is to say, many scholars cling to it from fear that if humanity lost its faith in 18th century humanistic ideals, however groundless that faith might be, it could only revert to something worse.

The construction of ethics proposes a better alternative, an alternative that does have rational grounds. Its conclusion is the opposite of postmodernism: human dignity is sacred as are many other ideals. Plain scientific research done every day: without any need for a special philosophical interpretation of science demonstrates that there are many religions with many conceptions and experiences of God and the sacred. Everything known about Homo sapiens shows it to be an ethical species. Norms and belief-systems that embed norms in cosmologies are part of normal human life.

The many volumes of published scientific research on human ethical development reveal a mountain of evidence proving the theory that humanity is an ethical species. Among the best-known studies is Jean Piaget's research about children playing marbles and children forming

clubs with rules. It appears from cross-cultural studies that all over the world, for reasons genetically hard-wired, normal children at a certain age begin to form social groups with formal rules.

The majority of adults practice what Lawrence Kohlberg and others call a conventional morality. The conventions vary from place to place, and from age to age. Kohlberg described late 20th century psychology of moral development as a technology that made it possible to implement the early 20th century philosophy of John Dewey. According to Dewey, the task of social reconstruction is to improve the ethical conventions that govern social life.

Another helpful consequence of the construction of ethics talk is that it offers an alternative to the rational social choice theories of neoliberal ideology. Kenneth Arrow, Gary Becker, Robert Nozick and many others think that modernity, by means of free markets and democratic elections, has replaced the world's ancient civilizations, based on custom and convention, with a new and better modern form of life, in which the ethical criterion justifying all legitimate value judgments is free choice.

The construction of ethics opens the way to a higher form of pragmatism in which there are more social choices than the rational choice theorists ever imagined. Namely, there are social choices about the normative framework, rational choice theory, and what the mainstream economics generally presupposes: the normative framework of property rights, markets, and contracts.

Pragmatism has a bad name because of its use as a euphemism for surrendering to economic power. Economic power defines itself as such because it decides whether economic activity stops or goes. No investment, means no go. Persuading investors to say yes may require delivering to business a skilled and docile labor force that works for low pay. Attracting investment may also require relaxing environmental standards, tax holidays, and public subsidies to guarantee private profits, privatizing water supplies to make water a source of profit, and allowing DNA patterns for patent. Subordinating social ideals while taking whatever measures are required to please investors often has the label of so-called pragmatism tacked onto to it by media apologists and political allies. A higher form of pragmatism does not surrender to economic power, patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality or any other form of socially constituted power; a higher pragmatism is the process of thinking outside the box.

The justice that will make peace possible is not a rigid justice that makes the distinction between haves and have-nots universal and eternal. A flexible justice brings communities together to solve the problems of here and now. It is, as Leibniz said, "...the love of the wise." In Dr. King's phrase, derived from his doctoral research on Paul Tillich, justice is love in action.

Justice seeks to include everybody in the benefits of property ownership and in the benefits of medical and other advanced technologies. It is, as St. Thomas Aquinas said: a constant will—to continually improve institutions so that they function ever better to meet human needs and to preserve the biosphere. A higher pragmatism is a more scientific pragmatism, because in its passion for doing whatever works: whatever it takes to end poverty and oppression. It discards certain unscientific myths of the Enlightenment, for example, the myth that there was an initial social contract that set in stone the rights of property owners. A higher pragmatism says—yes—to these facts of the human potential:

- property can be redefined and redistributed
- debts can be cancelled, and
- firms can undergo social, not just financial audits, and everyone can become a full participant in the ongoing process of renegotiating the rules people play in the game of life.

Yes, each person can be both a beneficiary and a trustee of the capital assets accumulated in the course of history, humanity's accumulated knowledge, and our Mother Earth

The world of social democracy: the world that implements ancient ideals of cooperation and sharing under modern industrial conditions is the world where peace is possible. It is not a world without conflict, but it is a world without desperation; therefore, it is a world where conflicts will resolve nonviolently or with minimal violence.

It is not a world where we define justice finally, though it is a world where everyone can participate in the constant renegotiation of the rules of justice. The moral law that makes peace possible is not located in pure reason where Kant thought it was located. Instead, peace resides in a global mosaic of diverse cultures, each composed of many sets of more or less functional and dysfunctional language games. The task in the construction of an ethics is to facilitate the participatory processes that modify these many social realities to make them work better.

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