

1.

THE INESCAPABILITY OF ETHICS AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF «ANYTHING GOES»

A constructivist model
of ethical meaning-making

Jonathan D. Raskin - Alanna E. Debany

Critics contend that constructivism embraces an «anything goes» ethics that permits any position (Boghossian, 2006; Cobern & Loving, 2008; Gillett, 1998; Held, 1995, 1998; Mackay, 2011; M. R. Matthews, 2002; W. J. Matthews, 1998; Slife & Richardson, 2011a, 2011b). But does it? In our understanding of constructivism, ethics is unavoidable because people are always embedded within ethical perspectives that infuse everything they do. «Anything goes» is never an option, even if what goes varies by person. After distinguishing three versions of constructivist theory, we briefly summarize and counter various criticisms that portray constructivism as endorsing an «anything goes» relativism. Then we outline a constructivist model of ethical meaning-making.

1.1. WHAT IS CONSTRUCTIVISM

Before responding to the «anything goes» ethical relativism critique of constructivism, it is important to clarify precisely what is meant by «constructivism». Glaserfeld's (1995) two basic constructivist premises provide a nice starting point: (a) knowledge is actively built up rather than passively received; and (b) the purpose of knowledge is adaptive, not representational. This means that people actively participate in developing knowledge and they do so in order to survive. When it comes to ethics, people construct ethical perspectives as a way to manage relationships and establish guidelines of acceptable behavior – all to the end of maximizing their ability to effectively carry on with one another. Constructivist approaches stress the viability of knowledge, or how well it works (Glaserfeld, 1995). In this regard, constructivism has much in common with philosophical pragmatism, which evaluates knowledge not so much in terms of its correspondence with things in themselves, but its ability to help us achieve desired ends (Butt, 2000, 2008). Before proceeding further, three specific constructivist approaches are briefly distinguished.

1.1.1. *Personal construct psychology*

George Kelly's *personal construct psychology* focuses on how people create individualized systems of bipolar meaning dimensions (i.e., personal constructs) that they use to anticipate events (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). Constructs are bipolar in that each one constitutes an idea and its perceived opposite. In personal construct psychology, one can only define what something is by also defining what it is not (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). Personal construct research and psychotherapy focus on measuring and helping people revise constructs (Fransella, 2003; Jancowicz, 2003; Winter & Viney, 2005). Importantly, people are never directly in touch with events themselves. They know the world indirectly via their own unique sets of personal constructs (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). Reality and one's constructions of it are not the same. As the philosopher and scientist Alfred Korzybski (1933, p. 750) put it: «A map *is not* the territory».

1.1.2. *Radical constructivism*

Like personal construct psychology, radical constructivism also maintains that people never know the world directly (Glaserfeld, 1995; Larochelle, 2007; Maturana & Varela, 1992). Rather, a presumed external world triggers internal processes within people, who then respond based on their physical and psychological structures (Dell, 1987; Efran, Lukens, & Lukens, 1990; Maturana & Varela, 1992). People are only in touch with their personal experience. According to radical constructivist Ernst von Glasersfeld (1995), the purpose of knowledge is not to replicate the world as it is, but to help people survive in whatever circumstances they find themselves. What is «radical» about radical constructivism is that it sees human constructions as personal and private, with no way to ever know with certainty that one's understandings mirror an external reality (Glaserfeld, 1995; Larochelle, 2007). Though we all believe our understandings reflect something beyond our experience (and live our daily lives as if this were so), we can never rationally prove for sure that this is the case (Quale, 2008a, 2008b).

1.1.3. *Social constructionism*

Social constructionism differs from personal construct psychology and radical constructivism in its contention that human constructions are not personal and private, but shared meanings that we collaboratively create through our ongoing relationships with others (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1991, 1994, 2009). Meaning is something people «do» together. People create discourses – ways of talking, interacting, and collaboratively coordinating – through which shared understandings originate (Burr, 2003). These shared understandings guide our lives and are often mistaken for universal truths. The idea of *truth-as-socially-constructed* is rooted in

the assumption that what people take to be true is inevitably a relationally, culturally-derived product (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1994, 2009). What is true, right, or good depends on the discourse from which one is operating (Gergen, 1994). Social constructionists like Kenneth Gergen (1991, 1995) often balk at being classified as constructivists because they reject the idea found in personal construct psychology and radical constructivism that holds meaning to be personal and private. Despite the personal-social tension, herein social constructionism is treated as a variant of constructivism – one whose emphasis on the social nicely (if not always easily) complements the individualized approach more typical of constructivism.

1.2. PREMISES OF AN INTEGRATIVE CONSTRUCTIVISM

Drawing on personal construct psychology, radical constructivism, and social constructionism, the first author previously offered three essential premises for a loosely integrative constructivist approach (Raskin, 2011). These are described below and supplemented with a fourth premise. These premises provide the groundwork for outlining a constructivist model of ethical meaning-making, one that successfully navigates the hazards of relativism and «anything goes».

1.2.1. *Premise 1: People are informationally closed systems*

The first premise holds that *people are informationally closed systems, only in direct contact with their own processes*. This premise springs from personal construct psychology and radical constructivist presumptions of meaning as personal and private (Glaserfeld, 1995; Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). It challenges the usual view of information as independent of people, passing «in» and «out» of them. Instead, what people know is conceived as something they generate in response to internal and external triggers (Glaserfeld, 1995; Mahoney, 1991). People do not experience things in themselves; they experience the corresponding internal processes such things instigate. What people see, hear, think, and feel are internally generated constructions tied to underlying structure determined processes (Maturana & Varela, 1992). In such a conception, people are closed systems because they only know what is outside indirectly via how their internal processes respond to and make meaning upon being stimulated.

1.2.2. *Premise 2: People are active meaning makers*

The second premise is that *people are active meaning makers, drawing distinctions as they construct ways of understanding*. This emerges from the first premise by emphasizing how people build their own meaning structures in response to internal and external triggers. Glaserfeld and Kelly spoke of this in somewhat

different, but complementary, ways. Glasersfeld (1995) theorized that people create a subjective internal environment populated by «repeatable objects» that are treated as «external and independent» (p. 124). People also construct representations of other people, who not only are treated as external and independent entities, but also as having the same powers of active meaning-making and intentionality that they attribute to themselves (Glasersfeld, 1995).

Similarly, Kelly (1955/1991a, 1955/1991b) presumed people to be active meaning-constructors who devise hypotheses about the world and then test them out in the course of daily living. He criticized approaches that saw people as passively determined by external forces (Kelly, 1958/1969a). This is why he proposed his *person-as-scientist metaphor* (Kelly, 1955/1991a). To him, people are always actively constructing, testing, and revising the hypotheses they have devised.

1.2.3. *Premise 3: People are social beings*

The third premise claims that *people are social beings, using their intersubjective experiences to confirm the utility of their constructions*. This premise attempts to integrate the insights of social constructionism with the traditionally «private and personal» constructivist worldview. Though both Glasersfeld (1995) and Kelly (1955/1991a, 1955/1991b) stressed the importance of the social, neither of their theories is readily compatible with the social constructionist idea that meaning is a shared creation. Rather, each person construes the constructions of others and, in so doing, comes to coordinate with others in ways that subjectively feel like shared understandings – or social constructions. Glasersfeld (1995) conveyed this when discussing how we come to experience an *intersubjective reality*, which results when others respond to us in a manner that confirms our sense that they understand things as we do. Similarly, Kelly (1955/1991a) posed the notion of *sociality*, whereby we construe one another's constructions and, in doing so, are able to effectively adopt roles in relation to one another. When experiencing sociality or an intersubjective reality, we come to experience our constructions as socially shared to the extent that they appear to be (and, for all functional purposes, can be treated as if they are) also held by others.

1.2.4. *Premise 4: People construe epistemologically and ontologically*

The fourth premise is that *people engage in both ontological and epistemological modes of construing, alternating between them as necessary*. This more formally codifies ideas that the first author previously discussed (Raskin, 2011), but did not articulate as a premise of constructivism. The crux of this premise is that people alternate between two modes of construing. The *ontological mode* refers to instances when one's construing focuses on the external world, or that which is experienced as distinct from oneself and real in its own right. When people play

catch with a baseball, they construe it ontologically as having a true, independent existence. If the ball hits one of them in the stomach and she recoils in fear and pain, she ontologically construes the ball, fear, and pain as each being discrete things with their own essential qualities. People construe ontologically much of the time, taking the distinctions they make about things for granted. By contrast, people shift to the *epistemological mode* whenever they switch their attention to how and why they construe as they do. While construing epistemologically, one examines (and perhaps even questions) one's previously unchallenged constructions of baseballs, fear, and pain. Focus changes from *understanding the world* to *understanding one's understanding*. People regularly toggle back and forth from ontological to epistemological modes of construing. Distinguishing these two modes proves helpful in refuting the criticism that constructivism is hobbled by an «anything goes» relativism.

1.3. CRITIQUING CONSTRUCTIVISM

There are many critics who claim that constructivist antirealism yields a nihilistic relativism (Boghossian, 2006; Cobern & Loving, 2008; Gillett, 1998; Held, 1995, 1998; Mackay, 2011; M. R. Matthews, 2002; W. J. Matthews, 1998; Slife & Richardson, 2011a, 2011b). As a result, constructivists presumably have no basis for making ethical (or any other) truth claims because if truth changes depending on how one construes it, then one set of ethical claims is just as legitimate as any other. For these critics, constructivism's antirealism inevitably leads to an ethical «anything goes» stance. Before outlining a constructivist model of ethical meaning-making, it is important to respond to these charges of antirealism and «anything goes».

1.3.1. *Antirealism and relativism*

Critics argue that constructivism is a form of *antirealism* that produces an «anything goes» relativism (Cobern & Loving, 2008; Held, 1995, 1998; Mackay, 2011; Slife & Richardson, 2011b). By this, they mean that constructivists either reject the existence of an external, independent reality or deny that statements about such a reality can be judged true or false. Barbara Held (1995, 1998) is especially adept at sketching this argument. Based on their antirealism, she says that postmodernist constructionists/constructivists make the following indefensible claims: (a) knowledge is actively, socially constructed; (b) the constructed discourses people adopt determine the realities (and therefore the life outcomes) they get; and (c) even though the constructed discourses people use determine their realities, people can change their realities by simply changing their discourses. Critics see a nihilistic and dangerous relativism as emerging from these claims.

1.3.2. *The criticisms briefly summarized*

Held (1998) objects to the *knowledge is actively, socially constructed* claim on the grounds that it asserts that reality either (a) is itself nothing more than a construction, or (b) can only be accessed indirectly through actively invented constructions. She sees both grounds as antirealist. The first ground («reality is just a construction») is antirealist because seeing reality as invented denies it as something independent of our constructions, thereby conflating *epistemology* (the nature of knowledge) with *ontology* (the way the world is) (Held & Pols, 1985, 1987). The second ground («the world can only be accessed indirectly») is also antirealist because «antirealism always precludes any access – i.e., either a direct access (one not mediated by theory) or an indirect access (one mediated by theory) – to an independent reality, and that is the point of all antirealist doctrines» (Held, 1998, p. 199). Held's strategy is to equate the «reality as purely invented» and «reality as only known indirectly» positions and then to dismiss them both as equally antirealist and relativist.

Held (1995, 1998) also objects to constructivists who claim that *our constructions determine reality*. She compellingly argues that construing something a certain way does not make it so. Changing one's constructs does not alter the world those constructs were devised to help us navigate. Again, this fits with Held's contention that constructivists mistakenly conflate epistemology with ontology in ways that lead to philosophical incoherence (Held & Pols, 1985, 1987). She asserts that constructivists refuse to deal with things as they are and, by doing that, make a fatal misstep that ultimately renders their perspective not only relativist, but incoherent (Held, 1995, 1998).

Finally, Held (1995, 1998) objects to the constructivist claim that *even though constructed discourses determine personal realities, people can change their realities by changing their discourses*. Because constructions do not determine reality, changing one's constructions cannot modify reality. For example, construing one's partner as faithful does not make it so. Held (1995, 1998) forcefully complains that postmodern constructivists are self-contradictory for simultaneously arguing that our constructions determine our reality, but that we nonetheless can freely change this determined reality simply by switching to different constructions.

1.3.3. *Response to criticisms*

When it comes to *knowledge being actively, socially constructed*, Held (1998) has a hard time maintaining her stance that «indirect access» constructivists are antirealist relativists. She immediately contradicts herself on this point by commenting that the «relativism they wish to avoid is in fact avoided by their appeal to knowledge of *something* that is real, or independent of the knower, and because of this they cannot consistently hold even to the less radical form of antirealism» (p. 200). Held (1995, 1998) is claiming that mere acknowledgement of something beyond our constructions – even if only known indirectly – constitutes a form

of realism. If so, then she is correct that constructivists are, at least sometimes, realists (Noaparast, 1995; Noaparast & Khosravi, 2006; Stevens, 1998). Returning to ontology and epistemology as modes of construing, constructivists – in the spirit of Vaihinger’s (1952) philosophy – act «as if» the world is real whenever they construe ontologically. There is nothing inconsistent about this. It is perfectly reasonable to treat one’s constructions as referencing a world «out there». So admittedly, constructivists function as realists a lot of the time, which is fine because there is no reason they must (despite Held’s wishes) «consistently hold» to antirealism. To do so, regardless of the situation, becomes extremely limiting. Oftentimes it is necessary to preempt some constructions as true reflections of the real in order to get on with business. If a rock is hurtling toward us, we will construe it ontologically as real, hard, and potentially dangerous. To do otherwise would be foolish.

However, adopting a rigid realist stance, circumstances notwithstanding, seems equally ill-advised. That is, sometimes an epistemological mode of construing proves beneficial. Focusing on how and why people come to construe rocks – or, more interestingly for psychologists and counselors, human relationships – in particular ways profits from an epistemological mode of construing. When construing epistemologically, what one knows is seen as a humanly created product of personal and social meaning-making processes worthy of attention in its own right. Despite the critics’ qualms, «anything goes» relativism need not result. Because epistemological and ontological modes of construing are not mutually exclusive, constructivists can freely alternate between what Held sees as «realist» and «antirealist» positions without being incoherent or self-contradictory. When constructivists construe ontologically they are allowed to (and indeed do!) make truth claims about a presumed external world, even if they add the caveat that these truth claims are always offered from a particular place of standing or point of view.

This has relevance in refuting Held’s (1995, 1998) criticism that *our constructions determine reality*. Held seems to equate *experiential reality* with *external reality*, even though this is an important distinction maintained by most sensible constructivists. There is a difference between claiming «our constructions determine external reality» vs. «our constructions determine experiential reality». The former is admittedly incoherent, but the latter is clearly useful when operating in the epistemological mode and focusing on how meaning-making processes shape personal experience. After all, how one construes a situation can indeed impact in a very real way how one feels about it and deals with it. Again, this is not the same as saying «if one construes it a certain way, the world will be altered accordingly».

Recall that constructivist approaches value a healthy pragmatism, one in which constructs are judged not by the extent to which they replicate the world, but whether they prove useful and let us proceed satisfactorily (Butt, 2000, 2008). Glasersfeld (1995) speaks to this when noting that just because a construct works does not mean it «matches» the world as it is. It simply means that it allows us to move ahead effectively, which is not the same as saying a construction «determines» the reality one gets. Both Kelly (1955/1991a, 1955/1991b) and Glasers-

feld (1995) – as well as other sophisticated constructivist theorists, researchers, and practitioners – have built into their theories the idea that *oftentimes our constructs do not «fit» the circumstances* (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2010; Efran *et al.*, 1990; Mahoney, 1991; Neimeyer, 2009). When this occurs, our constructs fail us and are best revised or discarded in favor of new ones. Continuing to construe things the same way when our constructs prove unworkable is ineffective because *our constructs are not the same as the things they are devised to account for*. Once more, the map is not the territory. A bad map does not help us navigate the terrain we wish to traverse, but neither should a good map be mistaken for the terrain itself! Again, «anything goes» relativism does not result because constructs, while never reproducing the world verbatim, can be evaluated in terms of their viability – even if the criteria for making such determinations must be decided on by people and are not always readily agreed upon.

Turning to the criticism that *people can change their realities by changing their discourses*, Held seems to be expressing two somewhat different concerns. The first is that changing one's constructions does not change reality. The second is that people cannot simply choose a new discourse if they are, to begin with, the unwitting victims of all-powerful and determining discourses. The first concern has already been addressed in our argument that any theoretically refined constructivism does not conflate experiential reality with external reality. While we may never know if our constructs match the world, we do know when they fail us (Glaserfeld, 1995; Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). At such times, we can safely presume that our constructs do not fit the circumstances and we had best change or revise them.

The second concern touches on something very interesting, namely the apparent contradiction that we simultaneously are determined by and free of our discourses. Social constructionism is often criticized for its presumed antihumanism, seeing people as the unwitting victims of socially constructed discourses – as mere vessels carrying and perpetuating discourses that have been poured into them (Burr, 2003). At the same time, social constructionism is accused of saying that people can readily abandon these discourses and just choose new ones at will (Held, 1998). But if one is determined by one's discourse, how does one choose to stop being determined by it? This moves us into the thorny area of freedom vs. determinism, an issue that bedevils not just constructivism, but human science generally.

To start with, Held's (1998) characterization focuses mostly on social constructionism, as it is the approach that tends to stress discourses, and in so doing sometimes treats them as if they were freestanding entities that shape and determine human experience (Burr, 2003). On this point, personal construct psychology and radical constructivism – with their emphasis on knowledge as personal and private construction – provide a nice counterweight to the confusing notion that discourses are independent things that determine human meanings. Instead, they assert that all people ever know are their internally constructed understandings. The experience of a «shared discourse» emerges from sociality and the establishment of an intersubjective reality, but discourses are not freestanding entities

that inhabit and determine a person (Glaserfeld, 1995; Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). This is a point where personal construct psychologists and radical constructivists disagree with social constructionists. Held's (1998) criticism does not apply very well to personal construct psychologists and radical constructivists, who do not see discourses as independent entities determining people; nor do they see people as able to freely discard such discourses.

Though Held (1998) claims that constructivists unrealistically believe that people merely need to change their discourse to get a new reality, personal construct psychologists and radical constructivists are unlikely to see themselves in this caricature. Kelly (1955/1991a, 1955/1991b), for example, spoke of *core constructs*, which are those constructs most central to one's self-understanding; they often go unquestioned and usually only can be changed through intensive psychotherapy or other life-altering experiences. Given their central role in self-identity and the extent to which people are deeply committed to them, core constructs are not easily revised or replaced. Thus, Held's criticism does not apply to personal construct psychologists, who do not believe people can merely toss aside core constructs that they are deeply invested in and hastily adopt different constructs instead. To suggest otherwise betrays a limited understanding of personal construct psychology.

Similarly, radical constructivism emphasizes *structure determinism*, the idea that human understandings are constrained and shaped by physiological and psychological structures (Maturana & Varela, 1992). Therefore, radical constructivists do not see people as simply able to discard their meanings and arbitrarily substitute new ones in their stead. While both radical constructivism and personal construct psychology see humans as capable of self-reflexivity that allows them some latitude in revising their constructions, both approaches acknowledge constraints that limit what is possible. The caricature of the constructivist who believes people have ultimate freedom to construe any way they wish at a moment's notice is a straw figure critics like to sketch and then attack. Based on one's biology, psychology, culture, and relational history, there are clear constraints on the possible constructions one can generate. Thus, while self-reflexivity yields freedom to revise constructions within limits, «anything goes» is never a viable option. A variety of factors restrict human constructions and this precludes adopting any old discourse at any old time.

To sum it up, there are three main rebuttals of the «anything goes» critique of constructivism. First, «what goes» is constrained by the structure of the knower. How the human nervous system is built and the kinds of psychological understandings this allows place clear limitations on the constructs people can devise (Maturana & Varela, 1992). People often have no choice but to construe things as their structure dictates; only when their structure is sufficiently disrupted to require alteration does their construing change. Second, what «goes» is what works. Viability provides a clear basis for judging constructs and deciding which ones best account for a given situation. Third, though the world places restrictions on what constructs work, it also underdetermines our understandings. Glaserfeld (1995) got at this idea when noting we are most «in touch»

with the world when our constructs fail us. When they work, we only know that they are useful – not whether they reproduce events in and of themselves. Sometimes multiple constructions of the same thing are viable in different ways. For instance, construing a client who is in an abusive relationship as «responsible» may empower her to leave her partner, yet cause her to be seen as blameworthy for staying with him in the first place. Shifting to an alternative construction, in which the client is seen as victimized by social and economic circumstances that give her little choice but to stay with her partner, may also prove useful – especially in bringing attention to social mores that negatively impact those in abusive relationships. These two competing constructions make different ethical assumptions, but both provide something of value when adopted.

A constructivist perspective gives us permission to both use our constructs ontologically when we see fit, as well as to examine them epistemologically when desired. This is especially pertinent for discussing ethics because right and wrong are not easily identified as concrete elements of the physical world. An ontological mode of construing alone is unlikely to suffice, therefore, in deciding what is or is not ethically acceptable. It is to a constructivist model of ethical meaning-making that we turn next.

1.4. A CONSTRUCTIVIST MODEL OF ETHICAL MEANING-MAKING

From a constructivist vantage point, relativism simply refers to the idea that people always construe things from a point of view; therefore, one's constructions are by necessity relative to where one is standing (Raskin, 2001). However, «anything goes» is impossible because what is permitted is inexorably constrained by the parameters of one's construct system. To say that ethics is relative is not to suggest that «anything goes». Even though viewpoints are always relative, making ethical discriminations – or, to put it more starkly, distinguishing good from evil – is, frankly, unavoidable because no matter where we stand, we must make determinations about what is or is not acceptable. Kelly (1966/1969b) made this clear in discussing the biblical Garden of Eden story, in which Adam and Eve were forced to devise and grapple with at least three different constructs: loneliness vs. companionship, innocence vs. knowledge, and good vs. evil. They chose companionship and knowledge, but the choice between good and evil proved more daunting. Human beings have been trying to decide between them ever since (Kelly, 1966/1969b; Raskin, 1995). People cannot skirt the need to distinguish right from wrong; only by facing this task can they figure out how best to live and learn together. Constructivist approaches, therefore, see ethics as inescapable.

People do, by necessity, originate their ethical constructions from a relative position. However, this does not mean that they are forbidden from asserting their beliefs or that they must always accept competing ethical constructions as somehow equivalent to their own. People are embedded in their meaning sys-

tems; they believe in them – even when acknowledging that they themselves are responsible for constructing them (Raskin, 1995). As they tack back and forth between ontological and epistemological modes of construing, it is not only okay, but also unavoidable, that constructivists (a) unabashedly make ethical assertions; and (b) formulate claims about the nature of construing processes that lead to ethical assertions. It is the latter that we take up in the remainder of this chapter as we outline a constructivist model of ethical meaning-making.

The model presented is rooted in Kelly's (1955/1991a, 1955/1991b) personal construct psychology, while also influenced by radical constructivism (Glaserfeld, 1995; Larochelle, 2007; Maturana & Varela, 1992) and social constructionism (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1991, 1994, 2009). Our goal is to provide a framework for conceptualizing how people come to experience some things as ethical and others as not, as well as to make clear that ethics – while inevitably relative – is not an «anything goes» proposition. People construct, believe in, and live by ethical systems of their own making. We rely on and supplement terms from personal construct psychology to offer a model of how they do so. Importantly, our goal here is not to specify particular ethical beliefs that are «constructivist». Doing so would fall outside constructivism's range of convenience, which was merely formulated to help articulate how people generate meaningful understandings. To assume that all constructivists share a particular set of values makes little sense. Each person who identifies as a constructivist creates a personal ethical system. Our purpose is to offer insight into how people psychologically develop personal systems of ethics, not to declare a set of «constructivist» ethical beliefs – for in our estimation, just as there is no one set of ethical beliefs all people adhere to, neither is there one set of such beliefs for all constructivists.

1.4.1. *The ethical construct system*

In personal construct psychology, a construct's *focus of convenience* entails the specific situation it was created to account for (Kelly, 1955/1991a). Perhaps the construct «generous-thrifty» was originally devised in childhood to cope with whether to share one's teddy bear with a sibling. However, a construct's *range of convenience* is wider than its focus of convenience, encompassing all situations where it is judged relevant and applicable (Kelly, 1955/1991a). In adulthood, one might use the same «generous-thrifty» construct to make ethical judgments about sound tax policy, even though the construct was not originally created for such a purpose. Therefore, a person's *ethical construct system* consists of *those constructs whose range of convenience pertains to discriminations of «right» and «wrong»*. It is a subset of the broader personal construct system, containing constructs related to differentiating good from evil. Like all other parts of a person's construct system, the ethical construct system consists of a finite number of bipolar constructs that are hierarchically related to one another. These constructs evolve over time as the person encounters successive life events.

1.4.2. *Core vs. peripheral constructs*

As with any hierarchical construct system, some constructs in a person's ethical construct system are core, while others are peripheral. *Core constructs* are those that are most superordinate, taking precedence over other constructs subsumed beneath them (Kelly, 1955/1991a). One's sense of self is intimately connected to one's core constructs. Instead of an essential, preexisting self, selfhood emerges from core construing processes (Burr, Butt, & Epting, 1997). By contrast, *peripheral constructs* are more tangential to one's identity and therefore much easier to examine and revise (Kelly, 1955/1991a).

A person's ethical construct system is influenced by both core and peripheral constructs. This explains why sometimes it is easier than others to revise and reexamine one's moral beliefs. For example, let's say Jim holds the construct «loyal-disloyal» and that he places himself on the loyal pole when it comes to his core constructions of himself. Now suppose Jim's boss is accused of dodging her taxes. Jim's core constructs about being loyal result in his deciding to lie about his boss's tax transgression because for Jim, being loyal is central to his sense of himself as an ethical person. Now imagine that Jim also has a more peripheral construct, «honest-dishonest». While Jim mostly casts himself on the honest pole, he is able – without guilt – to tell a white lie to the authorities about his boss because honesty is not as key to his ethical self-understanding as loyalty.

1.4.3. *Guilt and moral crises*

Guilt occurs whenever one is dislodged from a core role (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). If both «loyal-disloyal» and «honest-dishonest» were core constructs for Jim, then he would experience quite an ethical dilemma in relationship to his boss' tax problem, finding it difficult to simultaneously be loyal and honest. Whichever he chose would likely force him to behave in ways inconsistent with where he stands on the other dimension, leading him to violate a central part of his personal ethics. Were this to happen, Jim would experience guilt. Importantly, guilt is not about the action itself, but rather about whether the action forces the person to behave in ways that go against core constructs. Thus, a hardened criminal, whose ethical construct system places him on the «murderer» pole of a «murderer-weakling» construct, may actually feel more guilt when he spares rather than ends the life of someone who has crossed him. In that person's construct system, standing up for oneself by killing others before they cause one harm is the right thing to do. It is actually letting someone survive (and hence being «weak») that results in guilt. This example perhaps illustrates why, odd as it seems to the rest of us, some criminals have codes of conduct that govern when it is deemed fair to use violence in responding to one's enemies. *Guilt occurs in the ethical construct system whenever one behaves in a manner that violates a core ethical construct.* Prior to behaving in a manner that elicits guilt, one may experience a *moral crisis*, which can be defined as *the impending awareness that one is about to violate a core ethical construct.*

1.4.4. *Tight vs. loose ethical construing*

Some people's ethical construct systems are very rigid, while others' display extreme flexibility. *Tight construing* produces unvaried predictions (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). It is exemplified in the adage, «no matter what, stealing is *always* wrong». By comparison, *loose construing* happens when we entertain alternative predictions for our constructs; they become less reliable but more capable of yielding new and potentially interesting outcomes (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). Perhaps stealing is wrong when done for the sake of acquiring material possessions, but okay when one does it to obtain a drug that might save the life of one's sick spouse. In order to make the latter prediction, someone who formerly held the tight construction that stealing is always wrong would need to loosen that construction and consider other possibilities.

Tight construing is reliable and leads to consistent outcomes. Systems of justice often depend on tight construing to produce dependable and even-handed results across many different circumstances. This works well in cases where people tend to agree that tight ethical construing is called for («No always means no!» and «Don't drink and drive!» are two tight ethical maxims that come to mind). It is less effective in instances where more nuance is required, occasionally producing assessments one considers unfair (e.g., «three strike» mandatory prison sentences and «zero tolerance» school discipline policies; by being overly tight, they disavow all extenuating circumstances). Given the uniqueness of each person's ethical construct system, we are aware that not all readers will agree with the content of our «good» and «bad» tight construing examples.

Our point, however, is simply that both tight and loose construing are part of ethical meaning-making. For instance, when dealing with cases of academic plagiarism, tight construing insures that all offenders are held accountable. This is why university policies tend to maintain that failing to understand plagiarism is not an excuse for engaging in it. Construed tightly, plagiarism is wrong no matter the circumstances. Similarly, police officers often construe tightly when speeding is at issue; though drivers are quick to offer reasons for exceeding the stated limits, tickets are typically handed out despite such explanations.

Sometimes tightness is seen as rigidity or failure to account for context. In such instances, loosening becomes a much-needed corrective. Loosening ideas about an issue (e.g., the death penalty, abortion, when and whether one's country should go to war, etc.) allows for new options to be considered. Building on our prior examples, even professors and police officers periodically loosen their constructions to make exceptions in responding to plagiarism and speeding, respectively. Yet overly loose construing in such cases makes predicting the authorities' behavior difficult because loose construing yields highly varied outcomes. One plagiarizer might be forgiven, another expelled; one speeder given a warning, another hauled off to jail. In any rule-bound arena, when construing is excessively loose, ethical judgments run the risk of becoming unfairly subjective and inconsistent.

The trouble is that people often disagree about when loosening or tightening of ethical constructions is necessary. When ethical constructs are too loose,

one hears complaints about «arbitrariness», «enabling», «lack of standards» and «anything goes». However, when ethical construing gets too tight, people rail against «legalism», «punitiveness», «lack of empathy», and «moralism». Striking the right balance between looseness and tightness in ethical construing remains an ongoing challenge that people must work out as they successively encounter new situations. As difficult and sometimes contentious as it is, *people are capable of regulating and revising their ethical construct systems by alternating between loose and tight construing.*

1.4.5. Righteousness and forbearance

Preemptive construing is «nothing but» construing (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). If one construes chewing gum as «nothing but» rude and inconsiderate, then one is construing preemptively. *Constellatory construing* is slightly different; instead of implying only one thing, it implies several definite and related things (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). Maybe chewing gum is not just rude and inconsiderate, but also indicative of low intelligence, low social status, and an oral fixation. Regardless, whether construing in a preemptive or constellatory way, moral judgments are likely to be clear, linear, and decisive. Such construing can prove very handy when a clear-cut moral determination is needed. Sometimes one must make immediate judgments on the spot. For instance, when being «hit on» in a bar by someone who is not one's spouse, preemptive and constellatory construing allow for quick moral judgments and, potentially, a hasty retreat. In our ethical-meaning making model, *righteousness* involves *construing in a preemptive or constellatory manner, allowing one the confidence and certitude to make swift and surefire ethical decisions without requiring extensive self-reflection.*

Compare this to *propositional construing*, which – unlike its preemptive and constellatory counterparts – does not imply anything in particular beyond what is immediately predicted (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). When construing propositionally, chewing gum might just as easily imply being brilliant or down-to-earth as it does being rude or dumb. No clear implications are attached to it. The advantage of this is that it discourages moralizing. Then again, so long as one construes propositionally it is difficult to make clear and precise assertions, ethical or otherwise, because all judgments are temporarily deferred (Raskin, 2011). This we call *forbearance*, defined as *construing propositionally so that moral judgment is held in abeyance. No wider ethical implications are implied by one's current predictions.* Critics unfairly portray constructivists as engaging exclusively in forbearance, refraining from taking broad ethical stands (Raskin, 2011). Yet constructivists indeed do vacillate between righteousness and forbearance in their construing because, like everyone else, they have no choice in the matter.

1.4.6. *The ethical decision-making cycle*

The *ethical decision-making cycle* builds on Kelly's (1955/1991a, 1955/1991b) original *CPC cycle*. It entails *circumspection*, *preemption*, and *control*. In *circumspection*, one searches for constructs from one's ethical construct system that seem relevant to the situation at hand. Should Andrea find herself being asked to lie for a coworker, she might review her constructs in search of those that might guide her response. *Preemption* entails deciding which constructs best apply. In Andrea's case, she selects «friend-acquaintance», «direct-avoidant», and «honest-sneaky». Finally, *control* is when one opts for one pole or the other of the preempted constructs. Andrea chooses «honest», «direct», and «friend». In so doing, she determines that she cannot lie for her coworker because it is dishonest; further, a friend is someone who should be direct rather than avoidant – therefore Andrea decides that the ethical thing to do is be up front with her coworker and explain why she is unable to lie as requested. The CPC cycle is central to understanding how people use their constructs to make determinations regarding appropriate ethical behavior. *People use the ethical decision-making cycle to circumspect, preempt, and control which constructs ethically apply to a given situation.*

1.4.7. *Moralizing, doubt, and crusading*

A number of other terms from personal construct psychology can be usefully applied to conceptualizing ethical construing. *Hostility* occurs when one tries to impose one's constructs on others even though there is mounting evidence that these constructs are not working (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). In thinking about the ethical construct system, we define *moralizing* as *hostilely trying to impose ineffective ethical constructs on others in an effort to validate these constructs*. For example, as support for gay marriage has expanded in the United States, moralistic construing against it has become more widespread. Arguments about how gay marriage will destroy the biblical foundations of marriage have become more strident and angry, despite (and perhaps because of?) growing evidence that traditional marriage has seen no negative impact in states where gay marriage has been legalized. Rather than revise or discard ethical constructions opposing gay marriage, moralistic construers opt to extort evidence to support their position. Of course, moralizing can occur in relation to any ethical position – both those we agree with and those we do not. We are aware that those opposing gay marriage may not see themselves in this particular example, just as most of us rarely identify ourselves as moralizers when it comes to iffy ethical constructions we push on others in efforts to validate them.

Threat is when one senses that one's core constructs require comprehensive revision (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). Threat in the context of ethics yields *doubt*, defined herein as *the awareness of a need for imminent change to one's core ethical constructs*. A social liberal who faces the dawning realization that his

government can no longer keep running up massive deficits experiences doubt when he finally grasps that his progressive ethical political stances no longer are working and need to be updated. Of course, he may respond to doubt by revising his views or, if that causes too much upset, engaging in moralizing. If the latter, then he will dig in his heels and loudly proclaim that all the evidence points to the need for more government spending – even though he faces overwhelming evidence that such a strategy alone will not work. If the former, he may begin to loosen his ethical construct system to consider alternative ways to make sense of events.

Anxiety occurs when one recognizes that the events one must deal with fall beyond the range of one's constructs (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). In the realm of ethics, anxiety yields *ethical confusion*. When ethically confused, *the moral conflict one faces lies outside the range of convenience of one's ethical construct system*. When the United States developed the nuclear bomb, initially its repercussions were beyond most people's imagining; the ethical constructs people had developed to that point simply did not provide a way to morally comprehend the implications of this awesome new weapon of mass destruction.

Finally, Kelly (1955/1991a, 1955/1991b) defined *aggression* as actively testing one's constructs and being open to the results. Aggressive people put their beliefs to the test and are amenable to revising said beliefs if necessary. Of course, others do not always appreciate aggressive people because aggression potentially challenges ideas that they would just as soon not reconsider (Kelly, 1965/1969c). When it comes to ethics, aggression takes the form of *crusading*, defined as *actively testing one's ethical constructs by implementing them in practice – with an openness to seeing how well they hold up*. Crusaders are sometimes admired, other times abhorred because their insistence on putting their ethical constructs into service often ruffles others' feathers. The muckrakers of the early Twentieth Century were not always appreciated; by strongly (and often righteously) advocating new social policies, they disrupted the status quo.

For good reason, the term «crusader» has not always held a positive connotation because, in some instances, those identified as such behaved in ways more consistent with our definition of moralizing. Moralizers attempt to impose their views on others, whereas honest crusaders – at least as we define them – are passionate about testing progressive social policies while remaining open to the possibility that things may not work out as planned. There is always a chance that ideological changes may be necessary to prevent an aggressive crusade from morphing into a moralistic inquisition.

1.4.8. *Sociality and transpersonal reverence*

As mentioned previously, *sociality* occurs when one effectively construes the construction processes of others and, in so doing, is able to adopt roles in relation to them (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). Sociality is critical to the ethical construct system because differentiating good from bad is ineluctably a relational

activity. That is, ethics always has to do with how we conduct ourselves with respect to others. One of the many reasons why «anything» does not «go» when it comes to ethics is because people relationally constrain one another through socially coordinating moral boundaries together (Gergen, 1994).

An important implication of this is that even though people construct idiographic and personal ethical construct systems, this is always undertaken within the parameters of context and relationships. While people may only directly know their own personal meanings, their constructions are developed at a particular time and place, in a world populated by other people. In other words, constructs are always developed within an *integral universe*, one in which everything is inter-related (Kelly, 1955/1991b). According to Kelly (1955/1991a), such a universe «functions as a single unit with all its imaginable parts having an exact relationship to each other. This may, at first, seem a little implausible, since ordinarily it would appear that there is a closer relationship between the motion of my fingers and the action of the typewriter keys than there is, say, between either of them and the price of yak milk in Tibet. But we believe that, in the long run, all of these events [...] are interlocked» (p. 5).

Seeing the universe as integral leads to *reverence* (Leitner, 2010; Leitner & Pfenninger, 1994). In the interpersonal realm, reverence «stems from the intimacy associated with connecting deeply and profoundly with the other» (Leitner, 2010, p. 230). *Transpersonal reverence* occurs when that connection expands beyond individuals to the broader social and physical worlds (Leitner, 2010). As Leitner describes, «the integral universe position means that these ‘meaningful relationships’ include relationships with other people, our culture, humanity in general, and the more-than-human world» (p. 231). The experience of transpersonal reverence – with its explicit inclusion of relationships between people, their cultures, and the wider world – leads to *transpersonal responsibility*, the idea that we have an ethical obligation to the people and the world around us. Ethical meaning-making, therefore, constitutes an undertaking constrained and influenced by our connectedness to one another and our surroundings. People do not develop their ethical construct systems in a vacuum, but rather within the complex context of an integral universe. A great deal of ethical meaning-making springs from the experience of transpersonal reverence and its implied obligation of transpersonal responsibility. While ethical construct systems are personal and private, they are nonetheless carefully calibrated to help people live effectively and ethically within an integral and interconnected universe.

1.5. CONCLUSION

Our constructivist approach to ethical meaning-making focuses not so much on generating a standard set of ethical beliefs that all constructivists should be expected to endorse. Instead, operating from an ontological mode that provides a firm basis for confidently articulating theoretical claims, we have outlined a model

of how people epistemologically devise ethical construct systems for themselves, which they use to live and learn together. Our model attempts to balance both personal and social factors in the development of ethical constructions. We hope it generates new conversations about ethics from a constructivist perspective.

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