

Vladimir Lefebvre's Theory of Two Systems of Ethical Cognition

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ABSTRACT

In his 1982 book *Algebra of Conscience* Vladimir Lefebvre contended that the dominant ethical systems in the West and the Soviet Union were fundamentally different [1]. However, people on each side usually assume that there is only one type of ethical reasoning. The result is that each side takes actions that are misunderstood by the other side. With the guidance of Lefebvre's theory it became possible for both sides to take actions which, although counterintuitive in their own thinking, could lead to more success in negotiations and a reduction in armaments. Luckily, Lefebvre's theory was used at the highest levels of the governments of the US and the Soviet Union during the break-up of the Soviet Union. Lefebvre's theory can be used in negotiations between governments, between businesses, and between individuals. The theory explains some of the difficulties encountered in the transitions in the post-communist countries. It may also prove helpful in negotiating with extremist groups.

Keywords: Reflexive Control, Ethical Cognition, Cybernetics, Negotiation

BACKGROUND

I met Vladimir Lefebvre at a cybernetics conference in the early 1980s. Thus began a fascinating series of experiences with international scientific negotiations and an introduction to a remarkable and important theory of ethical cognition.

I had initiated a project with Soviet scientists to discuss the foundations of systems science and cybernetics in our two countries. I invited Lefebvre to join the American team thinking that his knowledge of both countries would be helpful. He was then a professor at the University of California at Irvine. Earlier he had worked at the Institute for Systems Studies in Moscow. Lefebvre not only had lived in both the US and USSR, he had written a book, *Algebra of Conscience: A Comparative Analysis of Western and Soviet Ethical Systems*.

Lefebvre told me that his participation would be a problem. I greatly underestimated the magnitude of the problem. However, in the process of resolving the problem, I learned how Soviets negotiated and became familiar with Lefebvre's theory.

A DESCRIPTION OF LEFEBVRE'S THEORY

Lefebvre's mathematical theory of ethical cognition represents cognition in a three level structure. The first, lowest level is the person himself or herself. The second level is the person's

perception of himself or herself and the person's perception of his or her opponent or communication partner. The top level represents doubt about what the person knows about himself/herself and the other. Depending on whether the combination rule for the exponents is addition or multiplication, two quite different ethical systems are generated. See Figure 1. For an explanation of the math, see Lefebvre. [1] To understand the two ethical systems, it is helpful to think in terms of means and ends. In the first ethical system, the end does not justify the means. In the second ethical system, the end does justify the means.

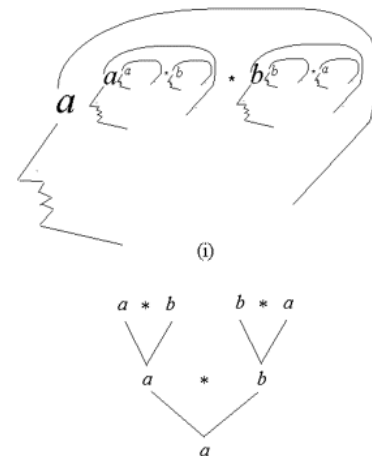


Figure 1. Three levels of analysis

To illustrate the two ethical systems, imagine two paper castles in two different valleys. Each castle is occupied by paper people. A dragon with a human face approaches the first castle. The people send out their hero to deal with the dragon with a human face. The hero approaches the dragon with his arms outstretched in a welcoming gesture, hoping to establish friendly relations with the dragon. But the dragon breathes fire. The hero is consumed by the flames and falls to the ground in ashes.

The dragon then moves on to another valley with another paper castle. The people in the second castle are not aware of what happened at the first castle. Once again the people in the castle send out their hero to face the dragon with a human face. But this time the hero advances with sword and shield, ready to do battle with the dragon. Again the dragon breathes fire. The hero is consumed in flames and falls to the ground in ashes.

Now, the question is, in which castle would you prefer to live? I have told this story at several conferences in several countries. I have found that it is a reliable indicator of geography. The closer I am to Moscow, the more people choose to live in the second castle. The closer I am to California, the more people

choose to live in the first castle. An exception is the Pentagon in Washington, DC, where almost everyone prefers the second castle.

In the first ethical system if there is a conflict between means and ends, one should be concerned. A bad means should not be used to achieve a good end. This ethical system is dominant in the West (i.e., North America, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand). In the second ethical system, if there is a conflict between means and ends, one should not be concerned. A bad means can be used to achieve a good end. This ethical system was dominant in the former USSR.

Using the two variables -- 1) whether a person is willing to compromise or not and 2) whether a person has high self-esteem or not -- Lefebvre identifies four personalities -- saint, hero, philistine and dissembler. He shows how these four personalities are different in the two ethical systems. In the first ethical system a saint is willing to compromise and has low self-esteem. An example is Jesus Christ. A hero is willing to compromise and has high self-esteem. An example is Abraham Lincoln. A philistine chooses to confront and has low self-esteem. An example is Senator Joseph McCarthy who looked for communists in the State Department. A dissembler chooses confrontation and has high self-esteem. An example is Richard Nixon.

In the second ethical system a saint is willing to confront and has low self-esteem. An example is V.I. Lenin. A hero is willing to confront and has high self-esteem. An example is Joseph Stalin. A philistine chooses to compromise and has low self-esteem. An example is Nikita Khrushchev, who was willing to compromise with President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis. A dissembler chooses to compromise and has high self-esteem. An example is Leonid Brezhnev, who awarded himself several medals for heroism during the Great Patriotic War.

To illustrate the second ethical system consider Lenin's famous statement in 1920: "We repudiate all morality that proceeds from supernatural ideas or ideas that are outside class conceptions. Morality is entirely subordinate to the interests of class war. Everything is moral that is necessary for the annihilation of the old exploiting social order and for uniting the proletariat." [2]

HOW THE TWO ETHICAL SYSTEMS LEAD TO CONFLICT

We can now ask, How do these two ethical systems lead to difficulties in international relations? The answer is that each side presents itself as honorable, but each side interprets the other side as dishonorable. An example was the summit in 1961 when Kennedy and Khrushchev met in Vienna, Austria. As described in Newsweek [3], "Khrushchev behaved like a brute at his Vienna conference with Kennedy. He went home with the sense that the American President was a pushover. Kennedy went home knowing he had to take action to overcome that impression. Plenty of trouble followed."

The trouble that followed was that Khrushchev decided to put missiles in Cuba. E. Germany began building the Berlin wall in

August 1961. Kennedy decided to oppose communist advances in Viet Nam. Also, Kennedy ordered the creation of an office in the CIA to make psychological profiles of foreign leaders and to brief top US diplomats before high level meetings. After the Vienna meeting Kennedy had said, "I never met a man like that before."

Another example of misunderstandings due to the two ethical systems was the visit by U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim to Teheran in 1980. Waldheim had gone to Iran to attempt to negotiate the release of US hostages being held there. During a televised press conference after a meeting with Iranian government officials, Waldheim said that the discussions had gone well, that both sides were willing to compromise. Later, on his way to the airport Waldheim's car was surrounded and stoned. He was lucky to get out of the country alive. Why were the Iranians angry? He said they were willing to compromise, which they interpreted as an insult.

Previous explanations for the Cold War were: 1) ideological competition -- communism vs. capitalism; 2) spheres of influence or geopolitics; and 3) the belief that the military and industrial establishments in both countries have an interest in continued hostility and military spending. Lefebvre's work suggests a fourth explanation -- a very deep ethical difference.

People from the West may wonder how a society can work if people are unwilling to compromise. As an example, Mark Popovsky describes the case of a fire in a classified laboratory: "When the firemen arrived at the laboratory, the guards at the door would not admit them, because they did not have security clearances. An intense argument ensued. Finally the firemen went around to the side of the building and entered through a window. The guards did not stop them because their job was to guard the front door. A board of inquiry ruled that both groups had acted appropriately. Both had been uncompromising in carrying out their duty." [4]

The two systems of ethical cognition sometimes appear in spy novels. Here is a passage from John Le Carre's, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. [5] A British diplomat speaking to a Soviet diplomat says, "I once heard someone say morality was method. Do you hold with that? I suppose you wouldn't. You would say that morality was vested in the aim, I expect. Difficult to know what one's aims are, that's the trouble, especially if you're British."

The first ethical system is characteristic of the West. It is process oriented, using a bad means to achieve a good end is bad. The second ethical system was characteristic of the USSR. It is goal oriented, using a bad means to achieve a good end is good. The two sergeants in the movie *Platoon* illustrate the two ethical systems. Sergeant Elias represented the first ethical system. He said even in war some means are not permitted, e.g., killing civilians. Sergeant Barnes represented the second ethical system. He said in war the goal is victory and any means necessary is permitted. The main character in the movie was torn between the two and felt that they were battling for his soul. Other Viet Nam war movies, for example *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter* portray the psychological stress felt by soldiers raised in the first ethical system who felt compelled to act in accord with the second ethical system. [6]

TESTIMONIES BY RUSSIAN ACADEMICIANS

In 2000 the Institute of Psychology of the Russian Academy of Sciences held a meeting in Moscow on Reflexive Control to honor Vladimir Lefebvre. The location was the President Hotel in a room over-looking the Moskva River. A statue of Peter the Great could be seen from the conference room. Around a large circular table Russian academicians introduced themselves. Each academician said in his own words that Lefebvre's theory had changed his life, that he now sees the world in a completely different way. This was definitely not a normal academic meeting. During a coffee break I asked Lefebvre, "What is the question to which your theory of reflexive control is the answer?" Lefebvre replied, "These people want to be more free." The collapse of the Soviet Union changed the borders, the political system, the economic system, the legal system, and the social and ethical system. What had been good became bad; what had been bad became good.

Lefebvre has explained that people are "imprinted" with one or the other ethical system at an early age. One's first response throughout one's life is to act in accord with the imprinted ethical system. However, one can learn the other ethical system and act in accord with it when one realizes that the imprinted system is not working in a particular situation.

In 1987 Prof. Josephine Woll, upon returning from a trip to Moscow, said in a lecture at the Kennan Institute in Washington, DC, "An important aspect of the cultural liberalization currently underway in the Soviet Union is a quest for values and religious moralities... This new attention to values is being discussed in cultural circles in Moscow and among university students." [7]

NEGOTIATING STRATEGIES IN EAST AND WEST

As a result of my work with Vladimir Lefebvre and with Russian scientists, I learned that negotiating strategies in West and East are very different. In the first ethical system both sides search for where they can agree. In the second ethical system, there is a series of ultimatums on issues where compromise is not possible. The actions which are not ruled out become the de facto agreement. Neither side compromises.

Lefebvre's theory was used at the highest levels in both the US and the USSR during the collapse of the USSR in order to prevent misunderstandings. It was NOT used during the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. In the spring of 2004 I was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Sarajevo in Bosnia-Herzegovina. I taught a course in organizational behavior for middle managers. In the course I reviewed the leading psychological theories related to management, including Lefebvre's theory of reflexive control. Out of curiosity at the end of the course I asked which theory they found most interesting. To my surprise they unanimously said Lefebvre's theory. When I asked why, they replied that Lefebvre's theory explained both why the Balkan war in the 1990s had happened and why conflict continued after the war. Previously I had thought that the theory fit only relations between the US and USSR. I now think that the theory is widely applicable in international relations negotiations and also sometimes in negotiations between business firms. I have heard that the theory of reflexive control is also being used in Russia in

education and psychotherapy to help people cope with the changing system of values. Like the Russian academicians at the President Hotel in 2000 I now very frequently ask myself whether someone is using the first or the second ethical system and what an appropriate response will be. I think Lefebvre has made a very fundamental contribution to our understanding of human psychology and to world peace.

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