

ETHICS BETWEEN PRINCIPLES AND EXPERIENCE: A POSSIBLE CONSTRUCTIVIST-CONSISTENT APPROACH

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Abstract: What we witness today is a world at war, where discrimination is increasing rather than decreasing. People kill other people, and the victims are often civilians. Migrants from poor countries are being turned away by wealthy nations. The fable of a peaceful world after World War II has turned out to be, indeed, just a fable. The rules that nations had established to prevent all this are constantly being questioned, if not openly circumvented. In a context that can commonly be described this way, it becomes inevitable to raise the question of ethics.

Within this framework, the author will attempt to outline an ethical orientation consistent with the assumptions of constructivism and Personal Construct Psychology, exploring the possibility of an experiential rather than normative approach.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The question of ethics arises from our experience when we begin to construe the events we are facing in terms of compassion, or conversely, of horror and disgust. If we look at our lives from a historical perspective, there are turning points or breakdowns that confront us with an evident invalidation of some of our certainties. What we perceive and concretely experience invalidates what we believed. As Gregory Bateson (1972) argues: "If we really want to know which moments in history are significant, we must ask ourselves which were the moments when attitudes changed. These are the moments when people suffer because of their previous 'values.'" (p. 478).

Auschwitz, for instance, was the invalidation of the presumed innocence of science. The reasons behind the Holocaust, in fact, lay in what was at

the time considered to be an objective scientific truth, expressed in the theory of race - a theory that, at the time, was regarded as true. Later, we had to face the knowledge of concentration camps and that element which signals to us the presence of an ethical dimension - or more precisely, the boundary of that dimension, its vanishing point - which we call horror. Today, that theory has been disconfirmed by science itself; and yet, it still persists in many people's worldview and moral codes. As Maria Armezzani (Armezzani et al., 2006) writes:

I have always wondered how representatives of a science that - both from the beginning and by principle - has ruled out human meanings and values, could have anything to say about ethics. How can they consider ethical questions entirely irrelevant when performing their scientific duties, only to find them extremely important once the work is done, when they

take off their lab coats and put on the clothes of the sage? There is something paradoxical about this figure of the 'ethics expert'. (para. 2)

In our time, we are witnessing another historical breakdown, the fall of yet another certainty: the idea, born after the Second World War, that a democratic West was the cradle of values such as peace, equality among people, and freedom. What we are currently witnessing concretely - for instance the Gaza genocide - invalidates our anticipations, our constructions of the world and of ourselves, which we once believed to be certain and definitively established. All of this compels us to reflect on our ethical experience, on what ethics is, and how it can be conceived and addressed in the terms of a constructivist approach such as George Kelly's (1955/1991).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before directly addressing a conception of ethics that could be consistent with the assumptions of constructivism, I feel the need to make some theoretical premises explicit.

2.1 Real vs. Objective

In philosophy and epistemology, the terms *real* and *objective* are often used interchangeably, yet they carry distinct nuances and meanings that must be clarified. Constructivism is neither a form of soft relativism nor strictly 'anti-realist' (Burr, in press). Rather, it positions itself orthogonally to the dichotomy between objective reality and illusion. Constructivists do not deny reality, but on empirical grounds, they do not consider it *objective*, as something given once and for all, for everyone. From a constructivist perspective, reality is not independent of the observer. What does this mean? I do not deny the reality of your presence here before me. But this reality, in turn, is not independent of my system's capacity to construe it as such. The persistence of the object, as Jean Piaget (1937/1954) demonstrated, is a

property expressed by our cognitive system, and it is by no means taken for granted. In the words of Maturana and Varela (1992): "Reality is not something that lies outside and independently of us, but rather a perturbation that our system specifies as such" (p. 169).

Let's take another example: none of us would deny the reality of water as something we experience in our lives. But *real*, again, does not mean *objective*. Let us ask ourselves: what is water for a human being, and what is it for a fish? I find it hard to believe that our experience of water is the same as that of a fish. From this point of view, ours is not a representation of an objective world *out there*: it is an active construction, the best possible construction at that moment of our being-in-the-world: "Being-in-the-world is not a passive condition, but a dynamic and interpretive engagement" (Heidegger, 1927/2021, p. 79, my translation).¹

Constructivist thinkers reject - just like the phenomenologists (Heidegger, 1927/2021; Husserl, 1936/1970; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012) - many of the dichotomies expressed in philosophy and psychology, including the idea that the knowing subject is separate from the world it knows, or that the observer and the observed phenomenon inhabit two distinct domains. The root of constructivism lies, rather, in the recognition - owed to phenomenology - that we are a situated, relational existence, involved and not separate from the world, present to it in an interpretive manner. We are our relationship with the world, and the world, in turn, is its relationship with us: the experience we make of it and can make of it. We are *embodied knowledge*: "We bring forth our world through the structure of our biological being and our relational interactions" (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 248).

Our very identity is formed through our being-in-the-world. I agree with what Miller Mair (1996a)

¹ For phenomenologists, "being-in-the-world" (*In-der-Welt-sein*) is a central concept, especially in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who develops it in *Being and Time* (1927). It expresses the fundamental existential experience of the human being (which Heidegger calls *Dasein*, or "being-there").

asserted, which I believe goes in this same direction: “we are always in the midst of speaking and listening, of questioning and affirming” (p. 91). There is no separation between ourselves and the world. What is real and imposes itself on our experience, in constructivist terms, is not objective.² In other words, *our map is our territory*, because it is the only reality we have at our disposal and through which we can orient ourselves. The world and the self are in a co-emergent relationship. We are what we do, what we choose - but also with whom and where we live. I will return to this point when discussing the theme of ethics more specifically.

2.2 Ethics vs. Morality

The difference between ethics and morality is subtle but significant. Both deal with distinguishing between what is right and wrong, between what is just and unjust - but their similarity ends there. The form and structure of their discernment are fundamentally different: ethics feels and thinks, questions and discusses; morality tells and prescribes. Ethics is fundamentally grounded in the concrete and lived experience of discerning good from evil, whereas morality is a codified system of values, norms, and rules shared within a culture, religion, or historical period. Ethics addresses the *how*, morality concerns itself with the *what*. Ethics can transcend, in a universalist sense, the various moral codes; morality always and necessarily begins with an ethical experience. In fact, I can obey a moral code without feeling or understanding it - without, in other words, having any ethical experience. But I cannot build any moral system without starting from ethics. “If morality is made up of rules that must be obeyed, ethics is rather the absence of fixed rules that compels one, each time, to choose by confronting a criterion that is hard to name” (Armezzani et al., 2006, para. 2).

If morality is ideological, ethics is critical, experiential, and phenomenological. My question is: can an understanding of embodied and lived

ethical experience restore a shared foundation? Based on the premises outlined thus far, I will address ethical experience, striving to avoid both the trap of prescriptive normativity and the spiral of inertial relativism.

3. ETHICS AND PCP

It is truly difficult to imagine PCP, grounded as it is in the principle of *constructive alternativism*, as a universalist moral theory prescribing norms that all people, in every place and time, should follow. At the same time, to consider it a form of moral relativism is only possible if we limit it to the domain of the *contents* that emerge in personal experience (Stojnov, 1996). Things, however, shift significantly when we turn our attention to the *structure*, *processes*, and *form* through which meaning is made. In this case - similarly to other thinkers of predominantly phenomenological orientation (Minkowski, 1933/1971; Bergson, 1934/2001; Husserl, 1936/1970) - Kelly (1955/1991) proposes a formal, abstract, and universal principle: that is, one applicable across many and diverse contents, and one that may guide us back into the ethical domain. Indeed, Kelly articulates a vision of the human being - encapsulated in his metaphor of *man-the-scientist* - as fundamentally and actively engaged in making sense of the world, of the self, of others, and of one's relationship to all of these. A vision that, at its core, is not far from Eugene Minkowski's 'criterion of the human' (1933/1971), in which what defines a human being is not merely rationality or consciousness, but a living presence in the world: lived time, movement toward the other, and the capacity to enter into relationship. As Walker (1996) points out:

In entirely abstract and formal terms, Kelly places emphasis on a human being with their face turned toward the future, striving to confront the unknown - one who should continue moving forward into what is not yet

² One could say that while the goal of mainstream positivist science - and much of commonly understood knowledge - is to acquire objective knowledge of reality, the goal of those who approach knowledge from a constructivist perspective is to develop an active and viable understanding of reality.

understood, at times blindly, but at least occasionally with courage, imagination, and boldness. (p. 18)

This principle, ultimately, not only implicitly invites us to transcend the obvious - it also places us all, inclusively, on the same plane: we are *all* engaged in making sense of our experience of the world. We are all "a form of knowledge in motion" (Mair, 1996b, p. 14). Relativistic, to some extent, in its contents, PCP appears universalistic in the *form* and *structure* of the knowing processes and their underlying assumptions. How, then, can the idea of *man-the-scientist*, and the notion of shared cognitive structures and processes, help us navigate the vast ocean of ethics?

4. THE ETHICAL EXPERIENCE

In abstract and processual terms, ethics is not separate from epistemology. We can, in fact, consider it a form of knowledge, a way of positioning oneself among others and in the world, with its own distinctive characteristics - in other words, an epistemology of the Self. The question, then, becomes: *What kind of knowledge experience is the ethical one, and what are its features?* Following the thought of Varela (1999), and that of other authors who have explored this theme (Armezzani et al., 2006), we can identify three key aspects: *evidence, immediacy, and inter-personality.*

4.1 Evidence

These days, I have been seeing images of malnourished, mutilated, and killed Palestinian children. The same scene is repeated in other theatres of war. The images are raw and explicit. Horrific. I don't know if you've ever watched videos of the stoning of women accused of adultery, buried up to their necks, defenceless. Have you seen their faces, exposed to stones - not too large, not too small - hurled not to kill them instantly, but slowly? In that moment, no argument could have convinced me to accept the

perspective of those throwing the stones at a face offered in defencelessness to another.³ Here, a deep and intuitive *evidence* emerges - one that has nothing to do with morality, nor with relativism.

As constructivists, we should have no trouble agreeing that this is a table, even while acknowledging that the world does not give itself independently of first-person experience. This table is something we assign the value of 'real' because it is co-constructed with others as part of a shared world. No constructivist would dream of saying the table doesn't exist simply because we know it from our own perspective. There should be no logical obstacle - at least for a constructivist - to applying the same criterion to ethical evidence and admitting its existence. Ethical evidence, in my view, lies on the same epistemological level as perceptual evidence. The name we might give it - closely following what Kelly describes in his Sociality Corollary - is compassion. Kelly (1955/1991) stated that "to the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another, he may play a role in a social process involving the other person" (p. 66). This process should be understood not merely as a rational or logical way to construct another's experience, but as one that is also visceral and preverbal.

Maria Armezzani (Armezzani et al., 2006), with whom I've often discussed and from whom I've drawn much inspiration on this subject, writes:

Constructivist ethics has been discussed at the level of logic, but too little has been said about that vital sensing which, instead, is so central to experience and which, in its deeper layers, hides the origin of feeling-with (con-sentire). Only by rediscovering this original ground of evidence, which unites us as persons, can we ground an ethics that is both secular and universal. (para. 5)

If I go back to the roots of how I began to look at the world and myself through the lens of

³ It was Maria Armezzani who, during our long discussions on ethics, suggested that I watch - as she herself had already done - those terrible videos.

constructivism, I must recognize that it is precisely intuitive evidence that led me to question the idea of a world separate from my knowing of it. It is because I must believe in my *concrete experience* that I can no longer believe in a reality given *outside* of experience. You and I can, therefore, speak of the 'same world' only on this basis: conceiving it as an interweaving of shared personal perspectives. This perspective aligns with the radical constructivist framework, where von Glasersfeld (1991) maintained that what we call 'reality' is actually "made up of the network of things and relationships we can rely on in our lives and which we believe others rely on as well" (p. 7). This definition emphasizes that our knowledge is not a map of an external world, but a functional tool for navigating our shared experiences.

However, to consider knowledge - even shared knowledge - within the bounds of my first-person experience does *not* mean that I can construct the world as I please. Our constructions *direct* our actions; they establish boundaries and possibilities. I can sit on this chair, but I cannot marry it. I can love a person, but I can't cook them like pasta.

Our anticipation of events in a relational and interpersonal world gives us directions for action and constraints that do not derive from the deductive rules of logic, but from our being immediately within a field of experience *inhabited by others*. And it is an *ethical evidence* that not everything is conceivable.

4.2 Immediacy

In his work *Ethical Know-How* (1992/1999), Francisco Varela convincingly argues that ethical action permeates our daily lives—it is so visceral, so central and deep, that it expresses itself from tacit premises, from knowledge so deeply acquired that it becomes, above all, a *know-how* rather than a *know-that*. We act ethically because we *feel* that it is right, with no other reward than the action itself. Ethics is, in short, more about *feeling* than believing, reasoning, or obeying. Ethics, then, alongside evidence, is also accompanied by *immediacy*, by presence, by the instantaneous

readiness to act - without any need for reasoning. We enact our compassion the way we eat, speak, breathe, or drive a car: *instinctively*. We are exactly *there*, present. Also an expression of our being-in-the-world, of our non-separation from it, the ethical experience manifests as readiness-for-action, as an immediate sense and *know-how*.

What would you do if an elderly person fell to the ground right near you? And why would you do it? But more importantly: *What would you feel?* There is no conscious judgment here, but rather the execution - at a low level of awareness - of an action that appears as *embodied knowledge*, *habitual* in the sense that it *dwells within us*, the result of our being-in-the-world as part of our self-organization. Maturana and Varela (1992) argue that ethical understanding is not an abstract contemplation but a form of action. In this sense, the "feeling-with" or compassion becomes both knowledge and action, emerging as what can be described as "embodied knowledge" (p. 245). Once again, we can return to the distinction between *knowing-how* and *knowing-that*:

[...] *what all living cognitive beings seem to have in common is a knowing-how grounded in the concrete. What we call general and abstract are, in reality, aggregates of readiness-for-action. [...] The capacity to perform intentional and rational analysis during crises has appeared only recently, and very quickly, in evolutionary terms.* (Varela, 1999, p. 7).

It is precisely when our competence fails that we begin to reflect. Thus, without denying the importance of awareness and reflection, we may begin to appreciate the role of *concrete and immediate experience*.

4.3 Inter-personality

Another fundamental aspect of the ethical experience - one that seems widely acknowledged - is that ethics has to do with the *presence of the other*. Any 'other'. Indeed, compassionate and immediate evidence emerges only in relation to *someone*, to another identity with which mine connects and intertwines. But

which identity? And how do we construct our identity *in relation* to other identities? And what meaning does the construction of an other identity hold in relation to our own?

Dina Sanichar (the 'wolf-boy' of Sekandra), Amala, and Kamala are some of the documented cases - albeit with varying degrees of skepticism - of wolf children or *feral children* (Candland, 1993; Maturana & Varela, 1992). In different eras, they were found in Indian forests, raised among wolves. In all cases, they displayed wolf-like behaviours: they moved on all fours, growled, did not speak, and preferred raw meat. It is fairly clear that they had developed a *wolf identity*. None of them ever fully 'returned' to being human; some died shortly after. And this, perhaps, is due to the attempts to educate them into a human identity, which thrust them into an intense and irresolvable transition of guilt - a dramatic exile from their wolf identity and their social community.

These stories challenge our presumed 'human nature', but they also reveal that we can construct and organize our identity, and that we can play a social role - just as Kelly (1955/1991) suggests in his Sociality Corollary - only to the extent that we construct the other's construction processes, who in turn - one might add - constructs us. Reciprocal identities are, therefore, interconnected and contribute to creating that social space where, in structural coupling (Maturana & Varela, 1992), we develop and direct our behaviours - including those we might call ethical. Here, we are considering how identity - understood as an autopoietic system - produces and maintains itself and its organization through interaction with the environment.

In other words, this means that the genesis and maintenance of the organization of our identity system depend on the *regularities we construct in relationship with others*. This should obviously hold true when it comes to constructing ourselves as human beings, or persons, among other persons. From this, two interconnected and significant questions arise: *toward whom*, *toward which*

identity, can we develop an ethical feeling? And *in what kind of relationship* can that 'other' identity be with our own?

5. IDENTITARIAN INTERDEPENDENCE AND THE ETHICAL VANISHING POINT

Although these three characteristics may describe the shape and structure of construction within an ethical experience, they are not sufficient to provide a basis for distinguishing the boundary between 'good' and 'evil' throughout the course of our anticipations and the chain of our choices.

An additional element we can consider is the structurally relational interdependence of our identities (Stein, 2012), that is, the capacity to recognize oneself through the other.

Following the thread of an ethical experience that does not exclude the presence of the other - and recognizing that this social space originates from and is shaped by the way we mutually form our identities - the question might become: what is the lived, social boundary of our identities that allows or excludes an ethical experience? Given the lack of universal compassion, as demonstrated by wars, can we conclude that human beings possess variable ethical boundaries? Can ethics be understood as an integral part of our identity - a shared dimension grounded in personal and interpersonal experiences that carry intersubjective value and do not derive from a priori moral or religious prescriptions? The case of Dr. Munch may help us.

On October 24, 1998, *The Guardian* published an interview with Hans Munch (Schirra, 1998). Munch was a physician and researcher at Auschwitz, a collaborator of the better-known Josef Mengele. His job was to conduct experiments on Jewish children. At the time of the interview, he was 87 years old and regarded by those who knew him as a "respectable German doctor", kind and affable. Let me share an excerpt from that article:

He carried out his work as conscientiously as all the other SS ranks. 'To eradicate the Jews, that was the job of SS at the time,' says Munch. 'I could do experiments on people, which otherwise were only possible on rabbits. It was an important work for science.' (...) In the name of science, he ripped out prisoners' teeth 'to get to the pus'. If the teeth were healthy, he injected them with the pus from other prisoners. (p. 4).

During the interview, Munch was described by the journalist as very calm and quiet. He never expressed any remorse. I believe he clearly drew a distinction between 'human being' (biomass) and 'person' (ethical subject). In fact, as a physician, he regarded Jewish children as 'human beings', that is, better biological material than rabbits for his experiments. Since he was not killing 'persons', he felt no compassion. In terms of ethical experience, he perceived himself as ethically correct.⁴ In this sense, Munch acts no differently than many of us do - even in ordinary contexts (Arendt, 1964): we often feel surrounded by bodies that crowd the streets, live on the margins of our well-being and our cities, 'human beings', biomass we do not fully perceive as 'persons'.

Munch is no different from the wolf-children, and the wolf-children are no different from us: we all root our identities within the domain of group constructions, we all develop identity within a circle of belonging beyond which moral indifference sprouts - partial or total dehumanization (depersonalization) of the other (Arendt, 1964; Levi, 1958). Munch, like anyone else, developed his identity (his core role constructs) as a 'person' in relation to other 'persons.' From his point of view, however, it appears that the only human beings granted the status of 'person' - and thus of ethical subjects - were Aryans. His identity as a 'person' was deeply rooted in that group, within a relationship of total interdependence. But ethical experience, the immediate compassion for the other, stops at the threshold of group belonging: those who are 'one

of us' are ethical subjects; those outside are invisible - or worse, expendable. We may ask, for example, in what ways are Munch, the British pilots who bombed Germany during World War II, Pope Francis, and the Dalai Lama similar and different? Following the Commonality Corollary (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 63), we could say that they likely shared the same 'construction of ethical experience': an immediate compassion for members of their own reference group. However, they clearly differed in the groups within which they constructed - through reciprocal interdependence - the experiential regularities constitutive of their identities. The respective groups in which they were able to recognize themselves as persons among other persons were: for Munch, the Aryan people; for the British pilots (perhaps) the European peoples, excluding Germans; for Pope Francis, all human beings; for the Dalai Lama, all living beings. As a result, to construct someone as a 'foreigner' - or even just as 'less of a person' by denying their subjectivity (Stein, 2012) - is to introduce an ethical distance. In *If This Is a Man*, Primo Levi (1958/2012) - a man who lived as a prisoner in Auschwitz and described his experience with pages of authentic narrative power - wrote:

A part of our being is in the soul of those we meet: that is why the experience of those who lived in days when man was a thing in the eyes of man is inhuman. (p. 21, my translation).

In this sentence, in my view, Levi effectively highlighted both the rooting of identity in the relationship with others and the rooting of ethics in our identity as persons. It is, I believe, the same chain of implications that led Bannister and Fransella (1986), while addressing the vanishing point of ethics, to write:

People do, indeed, follow their constructions to the point where, if they construct others as essentially less than human, they are able to torment and destroy them for that very reason. (p. 27).

⁴ This is the fundamental ethical issue: dehumanization. It highlights how, even in ordinary contexts, a dangerous split between "human being" and "person" can emerge, which becomes the ground upon which moral indifference may arise.

This is the boundary along which Ethics is often suppressed, regardless of the 'moral system' adopted by each group. This is, in my view, one more reason to support a non-normative ethics, a constructivist path beyond both relativistic arbitrariness and normative rigidity.

5.1 The Person Criterion

The idea of an identity system that emerges from the immediacy of our being-in-the-world and depends on the regularities we construct in structural coupling within concrete relations with the other - through both similarity and difference - leads us to ask by what process or criterion we define ourselves - and define the other - as 'person', that is, an ethical being, rather than 'less of a person', 'non-person', or mere 'biomass'. What leads us toward humanization rather than dehumanization, allowing us to access ethical experience? Overcoming the split between the knowing being and the world that is known - alive in its phenomenological being-in-the-world - and accepting that our identity is relational and therefore interdependent with the identity of the other, in search of a criterion sufficiently abstract and inclusive, I propose the following:

The Person Criterion is the awareness that we are persons only among other persons, in a relationship of reciprocal identitarian validation.
(Giliberto, 2010, p. 74)

'Person' is not an objective construct, but it is real insofar as it becomes the dimension of meaning in which we erect our identity in co-emergence with the identity of the other, constituting the social space in which we enact our mutual anticipations. It is a construction of self and other that binds us - because we depend on it: to harm another who, in our eyes, is as much a person as we are ultimately damages our own identity. To put it differently, according to Maturana and Varela (1992), a "destructive change" is defined as any structural change that causes a unity to "lose its organization" (p. 98) and, consequently, its identity as a particular system. This is akin to what Kelly (1955/1991) would define as "the

dislodgment of the self from one's core role structures" (p. 483) - in other words, guilt.

In my clinical experience, for example, I have worked with Italian soldiers deployed in peacekeeping operations in Bosnia during the Balkan War, who witnessed civilian massacres but could not intervene due to rules of engagement. They emerged from those experiences humanly devastated. The unspoken question underlying their stories and suffering was always the same: "And now, who am I?" Who was killing whom (or what)? Who wanted to save whom?

Where the Person Criterion collapses, so too does Ethics. Every face is stripped of eyes and gaze. No compassion is possible, and - whatever our codified moral systems, actions, or beliefs - the construction of ethical experience evaporates. At the same time, where and when the Person Criterion functions - whatever we mean by 'person' (even my dog), and whatever our culture, behaviours, or beliefs - compassion (co-feeling) emerges, and ethical experience not only becomes possible but becomes evident and compelling. Furthermore, the construct of 'person', as we are considering it here, appears closely connected to two pillars of PCP: the scientist metaphor - the idea of a person co-emerging with their world - and the Sociality Corollary. In my view, everything converges toward an ethical vision - understood as an epistemology of the Self - of relationships and the person. The Sociality Corollary, not by chance, expresses the necessity of accepting the other's point of view. Kelly (1955/1991) writes: "In order to play a constructive role in relation to another person one must not only, in some measure, see eye to eye with him but must, in some measure, have an acceptance of him and of his ways of seeing things." (p. 95).

But, at the same time, it is easy to see how accepting a point of view different from our own implies a recognition of the other: a phenomenological openness, a perception of the intrinsic value of every human being. Kelly's ethics, like De Monticelli's (2003), is ultimately an ethics

of feeling rather than reasoning. As with Lévinas (2003), for Kelly too, ethical experience does not arise from abstract rules, but from concrete relationship with the other. This ethics stands in direct opposition to any ideological, moralistic, or utilitarian reduction of the human. Where unscrupulous rulers see biomasses to eliminate, the ethics of feeling sees vulnerability and value. What I am simply suggesting is that this Corollary implies a kind of presupposition - and this could be precisely what is expressed in the Person Criterion. Although there are different degrees to which a person can construct the other's point of view - perhaps even Munch, in some way, constructed what his little victims saw - certainly within this Corollary there is a tension that draws us toward mutual recognition as constructors, as persons. As Bannister and Fransella (1986) say, if we do not understand other people - if we are unable to construct their constructions - then we can do something to them, act upon them, but not be in relation with them, not do something *with* them. For this reason, I believe PCP is the psychology of acceptance and interpersonal understanding - beyond those rules and moral codes that cannot encompass the vast variety of human experiences.

6. CONSTRUCTIVISM AND PCP IN A WORLD AT WAR

It is time to return to Gaza, to Auschwitz, and to all similar horrors: slavery, ethnic cleansing, war, the stoning of women, racism, sexual discrimination, and religious fundamentalism. At this point, can we take a stance that is clearly neither relativistic nor moralistic? I believe we can. I believe I have already, to some extent, argued as much. Following the idea that knowing means organizing and structuring a world constituted by the experience of the observer (von Glasersfeld, 1986, 1991), the construction of ethical experience becomes an epistemology of the Self

that goes beyond rules and normative principles. Following this line of thought, we can also clearly see where ethics dies, and where horror can arise. A horror we can understand - as we did with Munch - but which, being responsible for what we know, we are not obliged to accept.

We need no moral code for this, no moral authority to point the way. Our lives and the lives of those around us are not objective facts: their meaning depends on who observes them - not because the observer can construct them at will (relativism), but because what matters is inseparable from the very structure of the observer (Varela, 1992/1999). A structure that ethics preserves. This world at war tells us about people who consider themselves more of a person than others, and this legitimizes their dominance. This is not always explicit - no one will ever openly say that the rich are more of a person than the poor, for example - but it always becomes the basis for a moral code, a justification for some form of supremacy.⁵

But we - as constructivists - amidst all this, in the midst of this horror, can take a stand.

The very roots of constructivism and phenomenology seem to show us that the only way to overcome the barriers of belonging—and the resulting dehumanization of the other—and to access ethical experience, lies in recognizing a superordinate construction of human beings as a common factor, that is, seeing in each individual the value of a 'person'. Only by being able to look into the eyes of every other human being and see a reflection of ourselves can we be saved. And this - outside of any content-based morality, outside of any religious view, outside of any identity that denies the identity of others - is the only way to honour the equivalence between map and territory, to honour our fundamental being-in-the-world, which constitutes the fabric of our situated and relational existence.

⁵ One of the most dramatic issues of our time—or perhaps of history in any time—is the implosion of the idea of shared values, that is, of a single moral code claiming the status of universal truths, valid everywhere and for everyone. Today, multiple cultural and moral codes collide both within and beyond our national borders. In a state of constant upheaval, we are witnessing an increasingly polarized clash between incommensurable systems of moral values.

Ethics, understood in this way, arises from the concrete tension of being-in-the-world with others, and is inseparable from the responsibility to construct meaning within a shared reality.

The experience of ourselves among others and of others in relation to us is the only reality we have and the only one we can be responsible for, the only one we can care for. We have no other. Nor do we have an objective world to cling to. My eyes - as a migrant, as a child, as the last among the world - need yours... and yours need mine.

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