

# **Vladimir Lefebvre's Theory of Two Systems of Ethical Cognition**

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# Vladimir Lefebvre



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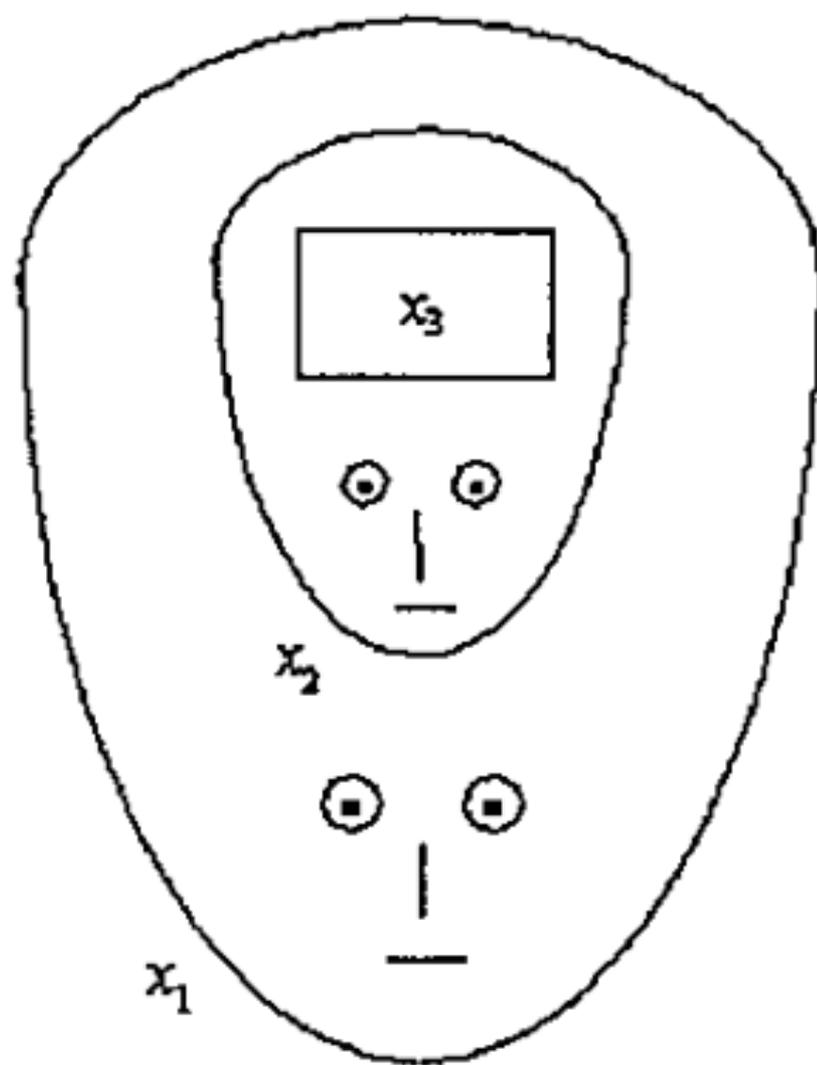
- A Russian mathematician who had worked on strategic studies in the USSR
- I met him at a cybernetics conference in the early 1980s
- I had initiated a project with Soviet scientists
- I invited him to join the American – Soviet discussions of the fundamentals of cybernetics and systems theory

# Lefebvre's theory

- Lefebvre, a mathematician and psychologist, had written two books about cognition
- *The Structure of Awareness, 1977*
- *Algebra of Conscience: A Comparative Analysis of Western and Soviet Ethical Systems, 1982*
- Soviet mathematicians were very good at deductive mathematics

# A source of conflict

- Lefebvre was then and is now a professor at the Univ. of California at Irvine
- 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 Lefebvre's theory



'My image of B'  
(from A's point of view)



$\bar{b}$

'They are different, therefore  
I am not sure that my image  
is correct.'

+



$b$

'The real B'  
(from A's point of view)



$a$



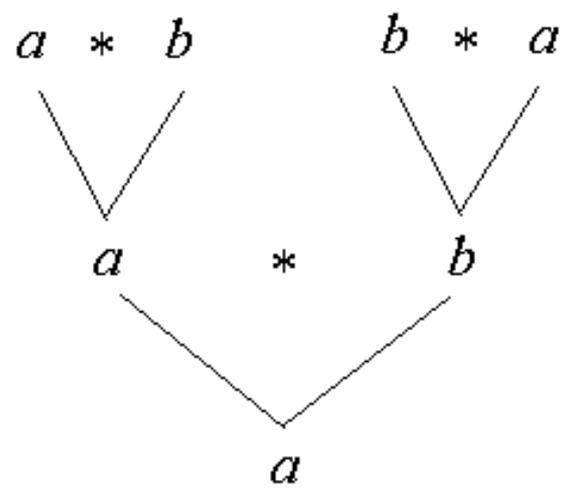
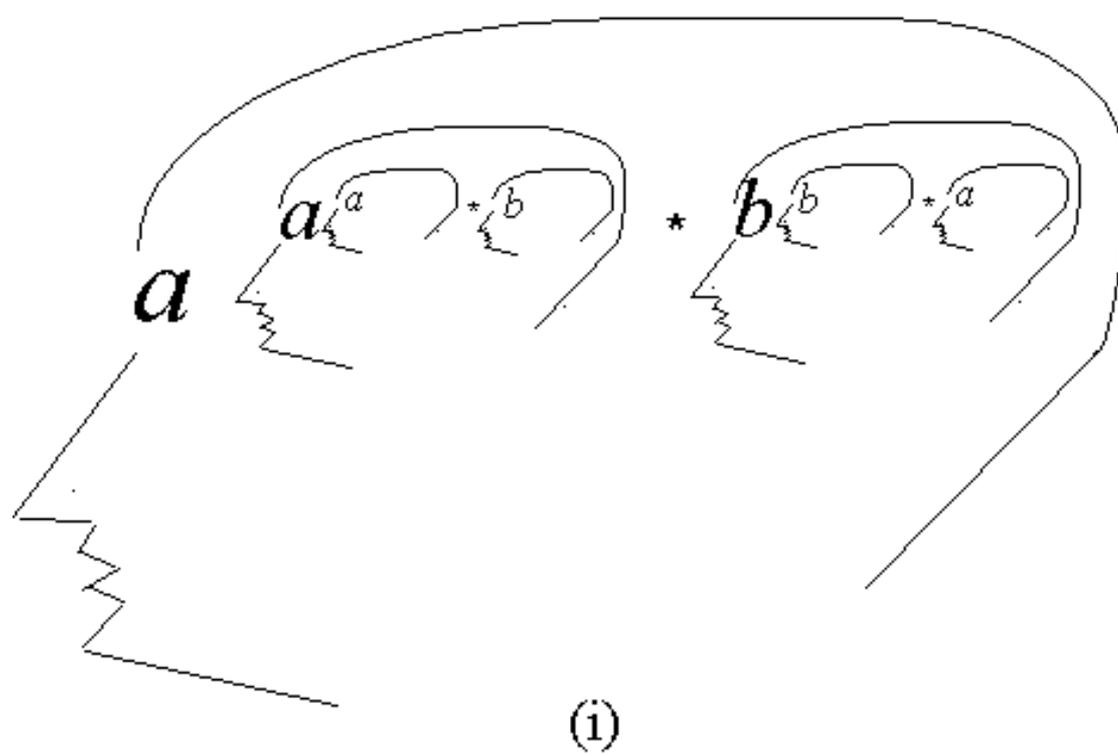
$a$

Reflexion is expressed in terms  
of exponents

**a \* b**

**a \* b**

**$S_1 = a$**



(ii)

# A paper castle



# The paper castles

- There exist two paper castles, a paper dragon and paper people
- A dragon approaches the first castle
- The people send out their hero to deal with the dragon with a human face
- The dragon goes on to the second castle
- The people send out their hero
- In which castle would you prefer to live?

# First and second ethical systems

- 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 dominates in the West
- 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

TABLE 1.1

Data from a study comparing Soviet and American attitudes toward ethical compromise and ethical confro

| Number of pair | Number of statement | Statements   | Americans            |   | Soviets              |
|----------------|---------------------|--|----------------------|---|----------------------|
|                |                     |  | Percent in agreement | Two-tailed confidential interval for $p = 95\%$ | Percent in agreement |
| 1              | 1                   | A doctor should conceal from a patient that he has cancer, in order to diminish his suffering.                         | 8.0                  | $\pm 6.8$                                       | 89.0                 |
|                | 2                   | A doctor should not conceal from a patient that he has cancer, in order to diminish his suffering.                     | 80.5                 | $\pm 9.9$                                       | 15.8                 |
| 2              | 3                   | A malefactor can be punished more severely than the law requires, if this may serve as a deterrent for others.         | 11.5                 | $\pm 8.0$                                       | 84.5                 |
|                | 4                   | A malefactor cannot be punished more severely than the law requires, even if this may serve as a deterrent for others. | 83.6                 | $\pm 9.4$                                       | 28.0                 |
| 3              | 5                   | One may give false evidence in order to help an innocent person avoid jail.  | 19.9                 | $\pm 8.4$                                       | 65.0                 |
|                | 6                   | One must not give false evidence even in order to help an innocent person avoid jail.                                  | 82.25                | $\pm 9.6$                                       | 42.5                 |
| 4              | 7                   | One may send a cheat sheet during a competitive examination to a close friend.   | 8.0                  | $\pm 6.8$                                       | 62.0                 |
|                | 8                   | One must not send a cheat sheet during a competitive examination, even to a close friend.                              | 90.3                 | $\pm 7.4$                                       | 37.5                 |

# First and second ethical systems

- A saint is willing to compromise and has low self-esteem
  - A hero is willing to compromise and has high self-esteem
  - A philistine chooses confrontation and has low self-esteem
  - A dissembler chooses confrontation and has high self-esteem
- A saint is willing to confront and has low self-esteem
  - A hero is willing to confront and has high self-esteem
  - A philistine chooses compromise and has low self-esteem
  - A dissembler chooses compromise and has high self-esteem

# First and second ethical systems

- An example of a saint is Jesus Christ
- An example of a hero is Abraham Lincoln
- An example of a Philistine is Senator Joseph McCarthy
- An example of a dissembler is Richard Nixon
- An example of a saint is V.I. Lenin
- An example of a hero is Joseph Stalin
- An example of a Philistine is Nikita Khrushchev
- An example of a dissembler is Leonid Brezhnev

# Lenin, 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.”

Q: How can these two ethical systems lead to difficulties?

A: Each side presents itself as honorable. Each side interprets the other side as dishonorable.

# Kennedy and Khrushchev Vienna summit

Kennedy and Khrushchev met in Vienna in June 1961.

“Khrushchev behaved like a brute at his Vienna conference with Kennedy. He went home with a 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.” *Newsweek*, 11/18/1985, p. 114

# Khrushchev and Kennedy Vienna, June 1961



# Consequences of the Vienna meeting

- Khrushchev acted to put missiles in Cuba
- E. Germany began building the Berlin wall in August 1961
- Kennedy decided to oppose communist advances in Viet Nam
- 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

# UN Sec. Gen. Kurt Waldheim

- In 1980 Kurt Waldheim went to Teheran to attempt to negotiate the release of US hostages
- After a meeting with Iranian government officials, Waldheim said that the discussions had gone well, that both sides were willing to compromise
- On his way to the airport Waldheim's car was surrounded, and he was almost killed
- Why were the Iranians angry?

# U.N. Sec. Gen. Kurt Waldheim



# Previous explanations for the Cold War

1. Ideological competition – communism vs capitalism
2. Spheres of influence, geopolitics
3. The military and industrial establishments in both countries have an interest in continued hostility and military spending
4. Cultural differences

# 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. A board of inquiry ruled that both groups had acted appropriately. Both had been uncompromising in carrying out their duty.

# Ligachev, chief propagandist, 1986

Today we must improve the atheistic upbringing of young people, of university students. Occasionally, some people who come across violations of the standards of socialist morality begin to consider the expediency of being tolerant toward religious ideas, of returning to religious morality. They forget the elementary Marxist truth that religion is not in any way the source of morality in the individual.

# Ligachev, continued

It is not religion which gave the people their moral standards, which have now become universal. These standards were developed and strengthened by the masses in the course of their centuries-long struggle against the oppression and domination of the wealthy and against the immorality and cruelty of an exploitative society. Communist morality has significantly enriched the common human norms.

# Soviet soldiers on Red Square



# A Western perspective

A British diplomat to a Soviet diplomat: “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.”

John LeCarre, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*,  
p. 70

# Lefebvre's theory of two systems of ethical cognition

- First ethical system is characteristic of the West. It is process oriented, using a bad means to achieve a good end is bad
- 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

# The movie *Platoon*

Sergeant Elias represented the first ethical system. He said even in war some means are not permitted, i.e., 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.

# A scene from the movie *Platoon*



# A meeting in Moscow

- In 2000 the Institute of Psychology of the Russian Academy of Sciences held a meeting on Reflexive Control to honor Vladimir Lefebvre
- The location was the President Hotel in a room over-looking the Moskva River with a statue of Peter the Great
- Around a large circular table Russian academicians introduced themselves

# President Hotel in Moscow



# The meeting room



# Statue of Peter the Great



# The meeting in Moscow 2

- Each academician said 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
- At a break I asked Lefebvre, "What is the question to which your theory of reflexive control is the answer?"

# The meeting in Moscow 3

- 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 was good became bad; what was bad became good

# Reflexive control

- There are two systems of ethical cognition
- 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

# A search for values

- In 1987 Prof. Josephine Woll upon returning from Moscow
- “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.”

# Future uses of Lefebvre's theory

- The theory suggests that a cultural difference was part of the cause of the Cold War – there was very serious miscommunication about ethics
- The theory can be used by Western and Russian businessmen to prevent misunderstandings
- It can help Russians be “more free”
- It can be applied to “business ethics” in US

# Some conclusions from Lefebvre's theory

- Negotiating strategies in the West and the East are very different
- In the first ethical system, both sides search for where they agree
- In the second ethical system, there is a series of ultimatums on issues where compromise is not possible

# Uses of Lefebvre's theory

- It was used at the highest levels in both the US and the USSR during the collapse of the USSR to prevent misunderstandings
- It was NOT used during the break up of the former Yugoslavia
- People in Sarajevo said in 2004 that Lefebvre's theory both explained why the war happened and why conflict continued after the war
- It is currently being used in education and in psychotherapy in Russia

Vladimir Lefebvre's website

<http://algebraofconscience.us>

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