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Chapter 3

The Social Construction of the Person: How Is it Possible?

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According to Volney Steffire (personal communication) theories of category formation can be divided into three general kinds: (a) realist theories, which argue that "people categorize the world the way they do because that's the way the world is"; (b) innatist theories, which argue that "people categorize the world the way they do because that's the way people are"; and (c) social construction theories, which argue that people categorize the world the way they do because they have participated in social practices, institutions, and other forms of symbolic action (e.g., language) that presuppose or in some way make salient those categorizations. The "constructive" part of a social construction theory is the idea that equally rational, competent, and informed observers are, in some sense, free (of external realist and internal innate constraints) to constitute for themselves different realities; and the cognate idea, articulated by Goodman (1968, 1972, 1978), that there are as many realities as there are ways "it" can be constituted or described (also see Nagel 1979, pp. 211-213). The "social" part of a social construction theory is the idea that categories are vicariously received, not individually invented; and the cognate idea that the way one divides up the world into categories is, in some sense, tradition-bound, and thus transmitted, communicated and "passed on" through symbolic action.

The goal of this chapter is to exemplify the scope of a social construction theory of category formation, with special attention to cross-cultural variations in conceptualizations of the "person." This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section presents an ethnographic account of traditional Hindu conceptualizations of the relationship between the individual, the moral-social order, and the natural order. Introduced is the distinction between duty-based and rights-based moral codes and the cognate distinction between those cultures in which it is believed that social roles are the fundamental building blocks of the social order and those societies in which it is believed that the social order is built up out of self-interested individuals in pursuit of their wants and preferences. The second section

examines the cognitive consequences of a duty-based versus rights-based conception of the person, with special reference to cross-cultural differences in person description and in explanations about the causes of individual actions. Indians tend to describe other people by focusing on concrete observable behavior (what they actually did) and tend to emphasize situated role obligations in explaining behavior. Americans tend to describe other people by focusing on what they are like as personalities and tend to explain behavior in terms of generalized internal dispositions of individuals. The final section examines the theoretical foundations of the social construction approach to category formation. A realist theory of category formation is contrasted with the social construction approach, as both theories are employed to explain why some categorizations of the world seem "natural" while other categorizations seem artificial. Explored is the distinction between natural and artificial categories.

Oriya Conceptions of the Person, Society, and Nature: A Primer

In this section we present a brief account of traditional Hindu views of the relationship between the individual, the social order, and the natural order. The account is based on 27 months of field work which took place between 1968 and 1984 in a community of Brahmans and temple priests in the old temple town of Bhubaneswar, Orissa. When we refer to Oriya conceptions it is to the conceptions of that community that we refer, although many features of the conceptualization are widely distributed throughout traditional Hindu culture.

The Natural Order Is a Moral Order: The Idea of Karma and the Just World Hypothesis

Oriya adults do not subscribe to a purely mechanistic-physicalist conception of nature. Rather, they believe in a natural process or principle known as "karma": the natural order is viewed as a moral order in which events happen for an ethical purpose, namely, to promote an equitable distribution of rewards and punishments. Oriyas believe that the facts of life are emblems of virtue, and that the moral quality of one's life, past and present, is written all over the trials, tribulations, and rewards of this world. Thus, for Oriyas, there are no accidental, random, or morally insignificant events. To be reborn is a sign of prior sin. To be born as a woman is a sign of prior sin, as is giving birth to a daughter, dying a widow, or suffering a lingering death. It is a sign of prior sin to be ugly or malformed or disfigured or handicapped. It is a sign of prior sin to die prematurely or suffer any major calamity. Oriyas believe that, in the long run, nature punishes vice and rewards virtue. Every informant can cite

cases from personal experience. A man kicked his father; later the man's leg became crippled. A relative went to Assam and unwittingly ate beef. He died a long drawn-out death with a lot of pain. And, in support of the idea of karma, informants are adept at citing the cases recorded in the vast "historical" corpus of the Hindu scriptures.

For orthodox Hindus in the old temple town of Bhubaneswar, a major way to prove a point is to cite or recount an historical or personal narrative, and a central body of evidence about what the world is like are the "historical" experiences narrated in the Hindu Puranas and Epics. It is important to recognize that for orthodox Hindus the actors of history include gods, demons, and hermits, who through meditation and self-denial gained extraordinary insight into the past and future as well as the ability to dominate the material world mentally. It is also important to recognize that while orthodox Hindus are perfectly capable of distinguishing fact from fiction, and will tell you without hesitation that the events portrayed in a Hindi film at the local cinema are not necessarily true, they do not treat the stories of the Puranas and Epics as fantasies, allegories, or poetic flights of the imagination. What we might view as myth or fairy tale they view as a solid factual account. They believe that the recountable experiences of their forefathers recorded in those stores are a reasonable guide to reality; and, thus, most expositions about what the world is like or should be like begin, "Let me tell you a story."

Let me tell you a story. Once Laxmi (the goddess of wealth) and Narayan (the God Vishnu, Laxmi's husband) were talking with each other. Laxmi, spotting a beggar, said: "Look at that wretched man. He is suffering and he is not getting any food. Now look at the man in that house. He is getting a lot to eat: ghee, milk, butter. And he is not giving anything to the hungry beggar." Narayan replied: "The beggar has nothing in his karma." Laxmi would have nothing of it. "You are everything," she said. "You are all in all. Creator, doer, destiny, and fate. You are always telling me that no one is superior to you. Many times I have heard you say, 'Whatever is done or is going on, I am doing it all.' If that's so, then why is that beggar wandering and going hungry? Why are you troubling him?" Narayan replied: "He has done nothing virtuous and therefore deserves nothing." Laxmi said: "You please give him something!" Narayan said: "Okay. Go and tell the beggar that I will put some money over there near that tree. But he must go there and get it." So Laxmi visited the beggar in his dreams and told him: "God has kept money for you near the palm tree. Go early in the morning and you can get it." The next morning the beggar awoke and set off in search of the palm tree. But it was not in his karma to find it. Just as he neared the tree he shut his eyes and walked like a blind man, missing the money. Then Narayan said to Laxmi: "Have you seen that? It is not in his karma."

That story, narrated by a 37-year-old male resident of the old temple town of Bhubaneswar, was meant to prove the point that nature is fair if not merciful and that even the gods are bound by an inexorable natural law of justice called karma. We could perhaps argue whether the story is about a

natural law of justice which the gods have no choice but to obey, or whether the story is about a natural *canon* of justice that the gods, out of fairness, are morally obliged to enforce. By either interpretation the story is explicit and unambiguous in its reference to one purported *fact* of nature: you reap what you sow. Oriyas in the old temple town draw from the story an even deeper, perhaps implicit meaning: *Only* if you do bad things will bad things happen to you. And they do not overlook the logical implication: If bad things happen to you, you must have sinned.

The blind widow, an 83-year-old high subcaste Brahman, lost her husband 5 years ago. A year later she lost her eyesight, and a year after that her eldest daughter died. Interviews with the blind widow were conducted by Candy Shweder over a period of several months. Approximately 20 hours of transcribed interview material is available. Thirty seconds into the first interview:

- Blind widow: You must not be feeling the cold at night. (Reference to the fact that the interviewer has a husband to sleep with at night.)
- Interviewer: No, I'm not cold. I have two children. Where do you think they came from?
- Blind widow: I've put a screen on my eyes. My husband is dead so I have put a screen on my eyes because I may get tempted by the husbands of others if I look at them.

In fact, the widow does think she is responsible for her blindness. Several weeks later, without the levity of the first interview, indeed, amidst tears, she recounts how her life is marked with signs of prior sin: "I was born a woman. I gave birth to a daughter. My daughter died. My husband died before I did. Suddenly my vision disappeared. Now I am a widow—and blind." She weeps: "I cannot say which sin I have committed in which life, but I am suffering now because I have done something wrong in one of my births. All the sins are gathered near me."

In fact, for several years, the widow has been concerned with almost nothing else but the mitigation of her sins. The precise nature of her sin is unknown, probably unknowable, but from her point of view the evidence of prior sin, her current suffering, is undeniable. She experiments with every local form of expiation: fasting, isolation, meditation, prayer, confession, offering donations, feeding Brahmans, ritual baths, worship of the Tulsi plant. She fears for her family and she fears for herself: "I will take rebirth after death. But I do not know what type of birth I will take; it may be an animal or beast."

For the blind widow, historical and personal narrative support the idea that life's events are ethically meaningful, that suffering is deserved and expiation possible. Moving back and forth between historical narrative and personal narrative the widow first tells the story of how the god Lingaraj (the resident deity of the major temple of Bhubaneswar; a form of the Hindu god Shiva) committed the sin of killing a cow, and then she relates Shiva's sin to certain

events in the life of her husband's elder brother. According to the widow:

Once Lingaraj went for a bath in the tank. He brought with him a bundle of holy grass which he placed by the side of the tank. When a cow swallowed the holy grass Lingaraj became angry and threw one of his wooden sandals at the cow's face, breaking the side of the cow's jaw and its teeth. To this day cows have no teeth on the side of their jaws. The cow died. Lingaraj was polluted by his sin. Even now, once a year, he must take a purifying bath and beg forgiveness from Yama, the god of death.

(Indeed, both those events, the bath and the confessional, do occur in the annual cycle of ritual events at the Lingaraj temple. Thus, on his way home from visiting his sister's temple, on that one day a year called "Jama Dutiya" in late October or early November when brothers all over Orissa make a ceremonial visit to the home of their married sisters, Lingaraj stops at the temple of Yama, the God of Death, and begs forgiveness for his sin.)

Sin and suffering are closely associated in the Oriya mind. That association will undoubtedly remind some readers of Piaget's (1965) account of the idea of "immanent justice" in 5- and 6-year-old Swiss children. According to Piaget (1965), the Swiss child conjectures that nature is just. From the child's point of view the physical and biological worlds function like a judge guaranteeing that transgressions do not go unpunished (p. 257) and that for every fault of conduct there is some physical catastrophe that serves as its punishment (p. 258). Indeed, Piaget argues that so deep is the child's faith in just desert that like other "simple souls" (p. 262) they "would rather assume some hidden fault to explain a neighbor's misfortune than admit the fortuitous character in the trials that befall mankind." It will come as no surprise to the reader that Piaget himself does not believe in immanent justice. He argues that "experience shows that wickedness may go unpunished and virtue remain unrewarded" (p. 261) and that "the greater the child's intellectual development the more clearly he will see this" (p. 261). He claims that the belief in immanent justice wanes with age and experience (p. 253) and that among adults the belief in immanent justice persists only among "primitives," "simple souls," and "those who never learn from the facts" (p. 262).

This is not the occasion to assess the accuracy of Piaget's description of children's minds (see Shweder, 1982, and Gelman & Baillargeon, 1983, for a critique.) To scholars of South Asian thought, however, Piaget's account of immanent justice will seem both uncanny and naive. The account will seem uncanny because the Swiss child's idea of immanent justice corresponds remarkably well to the traditional Hindu idea that nature is just (the idea of karma) and those issues about which Piaget claims that the child lacks conviction (e.g., by what process is just desert guaranteed?) are analogous to those issues where Hindus waver and speculate. Piaget's account will also seem naive. For scholars of South Asian civilization routinely encounter "sophisticated souls" of considerable intellectual power who are convinced that the physical and biological world is ethically meaningful and who are able to interpret many of the "facts" of experience, especially the unequal

distribution of health, wealth, and status, as signs of prior sin. Indeed, contrary to Piaget's developmental hypothesis, in India at least, faith in a just world does not decline with age, experience, and mental development; and on a worldwide scale the association of illness with prior sin is one of the more popular ideas among adults. According to Murdock (1980), for example, 80% of the world's cultures subscribe in some degree to the belief that illness is directly caused by a transgression of some social taboo or moral injunction. Murdock discovered in his study of 134 societies that it is injunctions concerning food and sex whose violation are most likely to be associated with subsequent illness. Perhaps not too surprisingly, that tendency of thought that links sexual transgression with suffering persists (albeit in primordial form—just below the surface) even in our own culture, where the AIDS epidemic is sometimes portrayed as a punishment visited upon the homosexual community and the herpes virus seems to many of its victims like just dessert for promiscuity.

Oriyas believe that nature punishes vice and rewards virtue. It is but a short inferential step to the idea that the Hindu social order is a natural order; that there are a set of objective obligations reflected in Hindu social arrangements; that Hindu society as a moral order is in tune with the requirements of nature. Or as one informant put it: "If you obey every custom you will be free of pollution and you will not suffer from any diseases." Hindu "dharma" as recorded in the corpus of Hindu scriptures is believed to be an account of those natural, objective obligations.

The Moral Order Is a Natural Order: Hindu Dharma and Natural Law

Oriyas not only believe that nature is ethical, they also believe that ethics are natural, and that the most natural of ethics is Hindu dharma, as described in their sacred scriptures (the Vedas, the Puranas, and the Epics) and as embodied in their social institutions and traditional practices. What makes the Hindu scriptures sacred to Oriyas is that they reveal the truth; not "revealed truth," but a truth arrived at over millennia in a world that kicks back. Oriyas believe that Hinduism, being a very ancient religion, has come closer to the truth than any other religion, and they view their social institutions and practices as reasonably well adapted to the ethical demands of nature. They believe that their distant ancestors gained salvation, and that as long as they follow the practices of those ancestors they will not suffer (as noted earlier: "If you obey every custom you will be free of pollution and you will not suffer any diseases"). A temple priest and local tailor comments: "We will be punished by God if we violate our customs—bad will come." A young newlywed, the youngest daughter-in-law in a large joint family comments: "We feel that something bad might happen if we don't perform a ceremony—even if we don't feel like doing it."

For example, it is traditional practice to change your clothes after defecation. The prescription is important for married women because it is the

wife's duty to offer food to returning spirits of dead ancestors; for this she must be pure. After defecation and before entering the kitchen a married woman *must* wash and change her clothes. Were she to violate the prescription, terrible things would happen: The ancestral spirits would refuse to eat, Laxmi (the goddess of wealth) would leave the house, and ruin would descend on the family.

Traditional practice also requires that a woman avoid her husband's elder brother. A woman may not eat with her husband's elder brother or talk directly to him or even wash the plates on which he eats. The Oriya kinship term for husband's elder brother means one-and-one-half fathers-in-law. Were a woman to violate this proscription terrible things would happen: She would die from a fatal disease and be reborn as an owl. (Parenthetically, it is worth noting that there are also strong avoidances between a woman and her husband's father and between a man and his wife's elder sister. Conversely, there is a joking relationship, and a sexy one at that, between a woman and her husband's younger brother and between a man and his wife's youngest sister.)

For Oriyas the moral order is a natural order; almost every justification of social practice is given in objective terms. Consider some of the justifications offered by informants for their cultural practices. It is natural to have arranged marriages: "A marriage is something that affects so many relatives and friends. How can you leave it up to one person, blinded by lust or passion, to make the decision?" It is natural for a five-year-old child to sleep every night with its parents.

Children should sleep with their parents because they may be afraid of something and not be able to express it. He may be afraid to urinate alone but he cannot express his fears. Even though a child of five can speak, he may not be able to speak immediately or know what to say. We are observing in our home that a four-year-old girl gets up and cries suddenly for no reason.

It is natural for a married son to inherit most of the father's estate and for a married daughter to inherit little:

Parents live with their married sons, not their married daughters. It is the son who must care for the parents in their old age. He must bear the financial burden and arrange the funeral rites. Married daughters have received a dowry and left the family. The needs of the son are greater.

It is natural for widows to wear white saris:

If a widow is fair-complected and wears a black sari, then she will look attractive. White color is the best way to symbolize a simple life. If you see a woman wearing a white sari you will not be tempted to look her over. To eye a widow is a very great sin and will cause you harm. If widows in every country would wear white saris instead of colored saris then the age of truth [Satya Yuga] would prevail.

It is natural for widows to avoid fish and meat: "Meat, fish, eggs are all hot foods. They heat the body and stimulate the senses. Rice, dal, milk, bread,

vegetable curry are cool foods. If you eat hot food the sexual appetite increases. This is the reason widows are denied hot foods." It is natural to eat with your hands:

We can eat more food than you when we eat with our bare hands. Eating with your hand has some advantages. It is good for your health; your five fingers touch your food and after eating you suck your fingers, which creates saliva, which helps digestion.

It is natural for the eldest son to refrain from eating fish or meat for 10 days after the death of his father:

If the eldest son ate chicken the day after his father died, the deceased father would not eat the food offered to his soul and consequently the father would not get salvation.

It is natural for a menstruating woman to be isolated and secluded, to be kept out of the kitchen and to be prohibited from sleeping in the same bed with her husband:

Menstrual blood is poisonous. If the husband cohabits with his wife he will be destroyed. His beauty will vanish. He will become ill and after some days he will die. For four days an evil soul is inside the woman, making her inferior to an untouchable, so no one should touch her. A menstruating woman takes the form of the goddess Kali; so no one should look at her face. If she enters the kitchen the deceased ancestors will not come again to the home for seven generations.

Oriyas are sensitive to the real or imagined consequences of conformity to the moral order or deviations from it, and they believe that if you violate natural law, nature will let you know.

Women do not plough the land. They can go to the field, sow the plants, arrange the plants in a row, but they may not plough. People will not let her plough because if she does, Laxmi will leave her house. If she touches the ploughing iron, something bad will happen. There may be an earthquake or the hills may split into pieces. Something will be destroyed—the oxen, houses, something."

The idea of "natural law" is not alien to the Western mind, and it still holds a respectable place in our moral and legal codes, especially in discussions of natural "rights." For what we think is natural about natural rights is that the obligations they place on us (for example, to respect the civil liberties of others), are objective obligations, and thus inalienable. The idea of natural rights is arguably a fiction, but as it has been conceived it places certain rights (free speech, privacy, travel) beyond the realm of the subjective, out of the reach of majority vote, above convention and consensus. Of course, a government or state may fail to realize its objective obligations and may not grant to its citizens any rights at all. But, according to those who believe in "natural" rights, the obligation is there nonetheless; being objective, it does not go away for having been misperceived.

If you ask an American or an Oriya whether it is okay for a brother and sister to get married, they will say no. They will tell you it is a very serious transgression. They will tell you it is wrong for brothers and sisters to marry even if it were done secretly and no one knew about it. They will tell you it is wrong even if the women were infertile and could not have children. They will tell you that the practice of brother-sister marriage is wrong even if it is approved of in other societies, and that those societies that condone the practice, if there are any such strange places, would be better societies if they did not. They will tell you that it would be wrong to engage in brother-sister marriage even if most people wanted to marry a sibling and even if a majority voted to make the practice legal. They will tell you that brother-sister marriage should not be allowed and anyone who engages in it should be reprimanded, fined, or punished. What is intimated by this pattern of responses is the perception that brother-sister marriage is an unnatural act even when regularly practiced, and that the law which forbids it is a natural law, objectively binding on all those to whom it applies—in this case, all humankind. And being an objective obligation it is binding on those to whom it applies regardless of their individual wants or collective subjective preferences. Notice there is no issue here of rights; willing, consenting adults are forbidden to marry their siblings even when no third party is harmed. There is an issue of duty, a role-bound restriction on one's conduct that is supposed to be natural. Brothers and sisters do not marry! Nor do members of the same sex, and so on.

Natural rights are not all there is to natural law. As the duty-bound taboo on incest suggests, the idea of natural law is more general than the idea of natural rights. Thus, to the extent that rights and duties are not the same thing, it is always best to keep separate the idea of the natural from the issue of what is natural: rights, duties, or something else.

A natural law is an objective obligation. What it is that is objective is an obligation, an imperative that tells us what we must do or must not do regardless of what we feel like doing. And that obligation is an objective thing; for example, incest is wrong whether or not it is recognized as such. The wrongness of incest is perceived as an external fact of life. Engaging in incest does not make it right; or so it is believed by those for whom incest is an unnatural act.

Perhaps the simplest way to think about the idea of natural law is to imagine that there are certain standards to which social practices, man-made rules (so-called "positive law"), and personal desires must conform if those practices, rules, and desires are to be valid. Those standards of validity are natural laws. They are held out as natural laws because if followed, they are thought to, *in fact*, promote certain ultimate, important, and categorical ends of life, ends that take precedence and are thought to be in no need of justification by those whose ends they are—ends such as liberty, justice, safety, salvation, and the elimination of suffering.

It is not hard to see why the idea of natural law is indispensable for designers of society. For it is the idea of natural law that is presupposed whenever we speak of a discrepancy between what is and what ought to be. What would American revolutionaries have done in 1776 without the idea of the natural rights of man? What would Iranian revolutionaries in 1978 have done without the idea of natural duties such as veiling, purdah, and so on?

The idea of natural law also does a lot for those of us who want to get others to do what we want. It is quite unreasonable to expect others to do the things we want simply because we want them to, and it raises all sorts of nasty problems of coercion, how to mount enough power to force them to our will, and so on. In contrast, it is not unreasonable, and requires no power at all, to expect others to respect the "facts of life," especially if those facts of life promote ends of life that are undeniably important to those whose ends they are. By an appeal to natural law, the weak can control the strong and the few can control the many. Indeed, it is the appeal to natural law that makes *rational* moral discourse possible in the first place. Without the idea of natural law all that would be left of the moral order is the strong, or the many imposing their subjective preferences, tastes, or desires on everyone else.

It is noteworthy that what one culture views as reasonable is not always the same as what is viewed as reasonable in another culture. What is thought to be natural on one side of the Indian Ocean is not always thought to be natural on the other. The Oriya practice of arranged marriage and the various restrictions on widows, the prohibition against remarriage, against wearing ornaments or colored saris, against eating onion, garlic, fish, or meat are viewed with dismay and disdain by Americans as violations of natural law. Americans believe there is a natural right to free choice in such matters, a natural right which being factual cannot be taken away, given up, or alienated. For Oriya Brahmins, however, the American practice of communal family meals is viewed with shock, horror, and disgust as a violation of natural law. Such American meals are sometimes prepared by menstruating women who join in and sit at the same table with everyone else! Seated at the same table might be a woman and her father-in-law or husband's elder brother, or a man and his wife's elder sister! Toward the end of such a meal a man might eat leftovers off his wife's plate or off the plates of his children! For Oriyas all those are unnatural acts. Natural law requires that pollutants and polluted persons be kept at a safe distance, that differences in sanctity, and hence status, are respected, and that those who are sanctified, and hence superior, are neither fed discarded food like hungry dogs nor insulted by a presumption of "free" affiliation.

Oriyas believe in natural law. They call it Hindu dharma. A 65-year-old blind hermit speaks as though he had been reading ancient Greek texts: "Only man has the power to reason and by virtue of this he is able to understand good and bad." A young former holy man takes a more empiricist view:

Suppose we say that everything in the Puranas is false. You can make a trial of it. You try having sexual intercourse on the Sankranti day (first day of

each fortnight) or the Ekadasi day (11th day of each fortnight). You will know yourself why the hermits have prohibited such things at certain times.

What everyone believes is that it is reasonable to learn from the experiences recounted in the Puranas and Epics—and what is recounted there reveals Hindu dharma—valid standards for judging social practice and individual conduct adapted to a natural world where you reap what you sow. Why repeat the suffering of others? Hindu dharma is that objective ideal and it is used in judgment of what is.

Duty-Based Versus Rights-Based Codes

Dworkin, in his book, *Taking Rights Seriously* (1977), has some important things to say about the difference between rights-based and duty-based ethical codes. Dworkin actually distinguishes between rights-based, duty-based, and goal-based ethical codes. It is Dworkin's point that, while all ethical codes have some place for social goals, individual rights, and individual duties, ethical codes differ in the scales over which goals, rights, and individual duties, in the priority given to goals over rights, rights over duties, and so on. For example, in a goal-based ethical code, some goal like "improving the general welfare" is taken as fundamental. In a rights-based ethical code, a right such as, "the right of all men to the greatest possible overall liberty" is taken as fundamental. In a duty-based ethical code, a duty such as, "the duty to obey God's will as set forth in the Ten Commandments," is taken as fundamental.

It is crucial for Dworkin's conceptualization that rights and duties are distinguishable, that rights and duties are not merely different ways of talking about the same thing. It does seem likely in the Oriya case that there are duties without correlative rights; for example, that the duty of the householder to feed a guest is owed to some third superior force or party like God or Hindu dharma, without the implication that a guest has a right to be fed. It is Dworkin's argument that, in many cases, rights and duties are not correlative because "one is derivative from the other and it makes a difference which is derivative from which." He points out that

there is a difference between the idea that you have a duty not to lie to me because I have a right not to be lied to, and the idea that I have a right that you not lie to me because you have a duty not to tell lies. In the first place I justify a duty by calling attention to a right; if I intend any further justification it is the right I must justify, and I cannot do so by calling attention to the duty. In the second case it is the other way around.

Ethical codes differ in whether they take rights or duties as more fundamental. According to Dworkin it is a difference that makes a difference. Duty-based codes are concerned with the moral quality of individual action, with the conformity of individual action to a code of proper conduct. The code itself takes precedence over the individual, his appetites, wants, or habits. In a

Geertz evokes this dimension of cultural self-conception in his discussion of the Balinese concept of the person. There is, he notes, in Bali

a persistent and systematic attempt to stylize all aspects of personal expression to the point where anything idiosyncratic, anything characteristic of the individual merely because he is who he is physically, psychologically or biographically, is muted in favor of his assigned place in the continuing, and so it is thought, never-changing pageant that is Balinese life. It is dramatic personae, not actors, that endure; indeed it is dramatic personae, not actors, that in the proper sense really exist. Physically men come and go—mere incidents in a happenstance history of no genuine importance, even to themselves. But the masks they wear, the stage they occupy, the parts they play, and most important, the spectacle they mount remain and constitute not the facade but the substance of things, not least the self (Geertz, 1975, p. 50).

From Conceptions of the Person to Social Cognition

In the previous section we discussed the distinction between rights-based and duty-based ethical codes. We suggested that each type of code represents society as a natural object of a certain kind. In rights-based societies it is the individual that is fundamental and real and the passions, tastes, and preferences of the individual and his or her liberty to pursue them that are made salient. In duty-based societies it is the organization of social roles that is fundamental and real and role-based obligations that are made salient. We suggested that in traditional Hindu society the social order qua natural order is thought of as an organization of roles and duties. Justifications of social practice and prescriptive arguments move from purported "facts of life"—for example, hot foods stimulate sexual appetites—to role-bound duties, "the duty of a widow not to eat hot foods like fish or meat"; and from derivative role-bound duties, "the duty of the widow not to eat fish or meat" to more fundamental role-bound duties—for example, "the duty of women to remain chaste." And why should a woman remain chaste? Well, almost everyone will have a story from personal experience or from the scriptures—suffering will be linked to deviation from role expectations. Nature will be shown to approve of traditional practice.

In this section we focus on the effects for social cognition of that culturally conditioned saliency factor. Cultural conceptualizations of the person make a difference for the way persons are represented and described, and for the way behavioral events are explained or given a causal interpretation. We summarize the results of some recent comparative and developmental research (Shweder & Bourne, 1982; Miller, 1984) on social cognition in India and the United States.

As noted earlier, the traditional Hindu moral code is duty-based and focused on social roles. The American moral code is rights-based and focused

duty-based culture, the individual must conform to the code "or be punished or corrupted if he does not." Duty-based cultures enshrine some blueprint for how people should live (for example, Hindu dharma with its emphasis on natural roles and duties); such duty-based cultures stick to the principle that one is not free to deviate from the plan or call on others to do so.

Rights-based codes, in contrast, "protect the value of individual thought and choice." The individual, his appetites, goals, and habits take precedence over any conception of either the "proper" ends of life or the way it is "natural" for people to arrange themselves in society. As long as one does not do harm to others or violate their right to pursue their own chosen wants freely, one is at liberty to do or live as one wants; and, in a rights-based culture it is the liberty of the individual to do and live as he wants that is protected and takes precedence. Between "consenting adults" almost anything goes, although not incest!

It has been said of ancient Indian ethics (O'Flaherty & Derrett, 1978) that it "knew nothing of rights, only of duties." Contemporary Oriya culture does know something of rights; there is a term for it in the language—"adikara." But rights are typically subordinated to duties, and it is the duties (e.g., of a son to his father, of a householder to his guest, of a wife to her husband, etc.) that receive the most elaborate treatment in local scripture and doctrine. It is the performance of duty in the face of adversity that stimulates feelings of righteousness and dharma.

Parallel to the distinction between rights-based and duty-based ethical codes is the distinction between person-centered and role-centered societies. It remains to be seen whether, on a worldwide scale, the two sets of distinctions run parallel, overlap, or are independent. In Orissa, at least, a duty-based ethical code has converged with a role-based conception of society. More generally, we speculate that those who believe that society is built up out of individuals in pursuit of their interests and satisfaction of their desires will prefer to rationalize the moral order in terms of natural rights, while those who believe that society is built up out of statuses and roles will prefer to rationalize the moral order in terms of natural duties.

Of course, the social order is built up out of both individuals (who always have interests and desires) and roles, and both are necessary conditions for social action. Nevertheless, cultures display considerable variation in what they take to be more basic, fundamental, or real—individuals or roles—facts about personality or facts about social status. Not surprisingly, in most sociocentric, role-based societies (e.g., East Africa) it is sociology (not psychology) that thrives as an academic discipline. In other, more individualistic cultures (e.g., the United States) it is psychology (not sociology) that flourishes at universities and popular bookstores, while sociology has an uneasy relationship to a public that finds sociological discourse to be unreal and laden with "jargon." Society is just an aggregation of individuals, is it not?!

on individuals. Duty-based codes direct our attention to the moral quality of individual action, to the fit between a specific action and the code of proper conduct (e.g., Hindu dharma). Rights-based codes direct our attention to the value of individual choice and the appetites, tastes, and preferences that the individual chooses to pursue. There are parallel cultural differences in person description and causal attribution. Shweder and Bourne (1982, also see Shweder, 1972), for example, asked adult informants in India and the United States to provide a description of the behavior, characteristics, and nature of someone they knew well. The Indian informants displayed a strong tendency to focus on the behavioral act, what someone actually did, and to situate the act in time, place, and by reference to specific dyadic relationships. The Americans displayed a strong tendency to focus on what the person was like, not what he actually did, to decontextualize behavior and to describe the person by reference to abstract, situation-free personality traits. Indians were more likely to say "she brings cakes to my family on festival days." Americans were more likely to say, "she is friendly." The tendency of Indians to perceive others in terms of "contexts and cases" and Americans to perceive others in terms of underlying dispositions of the person was found to be a general cultural difference. Indian informants who radically differed in education, social status, and literacy displayed a common style of interpersonal perception which distinguished them from American informants.

Miller (1982, 1984) examined the developmental acquisition of cultural conceptions of the person in research on social explanation conducted in Chicago and in Mysore, a city in southern India. American and Hindu children (ages 8, 11, and 15) and adults were asked to explain everyday deviant and prosocial behaviors. The results documented the existence of culture-specific age changes in explanation. Little difference in social explanation was observed among the youngest American and Hindu informants. Over development, however, Americans gave increasing weight to general dispositions of the agent, with no significant developmental increase occurring along such a dimension among Hindus. In contrast, over development, Hindus gave greater attributional weight to contextual factors, with no significant developmental shift in such references occurring among Americans. Evidence suggested that the observed trends reflected individuals' acquisition of conceptions of the person emphasized in their culture, rather than differences in individuals' cognitive capacities or objective adaptive requirements. The results highlight the importance of processes of social communication into the acquisition of person concepts. They indicate that initiation into a cultural tradition represents a dynamic process, with shifts in individuals' culturally derived conceptual assumptions occurring gradually over development.

Most of the cross-cultural differences in social explanation observed at older ages resulted specifically from differences in attributions to personality traits and to aspects of the social/spatial/temporal location—a category encompassing references to social roles and interpersonal relationships (e.g., "she is

my aunt") as well as references to the placement of persons, objects, or events in time or space. Indians tended to focus on social role expectations and interpersonal relationships where Americans focused on the agent's character. These cultural differences are illustrated below in explanations of the same deviant behavior offered by a Hindu informant and by an American informant:

Deviant Behavior Cited by Hindu Adult Subject:

This concerns a motorcycle accident. The back wheel burst on the motorcycle. The passenger sitting in the rear jumped. The moment the passenger fell, he struck his head on the pavement. The driver of the motorcycle—who is an attorney—as he was on his way to court for some work, just took the passenger to a local hospital and went on and attended to his court work. I personally feel the motorcycle driver did a wrong thing. The driver left the passenger there without consulting the doctor concerning the seriousness of the injury—the gravity of the situation—whether the passenger should be shifted immediately—and he went on to the court. So ultimately the passenger died.

Interview Question:

Why did the driver leave the passenger at the hospital without staying to consult about the seriousness of the passenger's injury?

Explanation by Hindu Adult Subject:

It was the driver's duty to be in court for the client whom he's representing (context—social/spatial/temporal location);

Secondly, the driver might have gotten nervous or confused (agent-specific aspects);

And thirdly, the passenger might not have looked as serious as he was (context—aspects of persons).

Explanation by American Adult Subject:

The driver is obviously irresponsible (agent—general dispositions);

The driver was in a state of shock (agent—specific aspects)

The driver is aggressive in pursuing career success (agent—general dispositions). (Miller, 1984, p. 972)

While both subjects attributed the driver's behavior to affective considerations, the Hindu informant also cited contextual reasons for the behavior, whereas the American informant also made reference to personality factors. It may be seen that the contextual factors mentioned by the Hindu informant—that is, the driver's role obligations as a lawyer and the passenger's physical condition—were explicitly mentioned in the event description. The American, however, overlooked such available information and instead emphasized dispositional properties of the agent, which could only be inferred. Evidence suggested that such cross-cultural attributional differences reflected both descriptive and prescriptive differences distinguishing theories of the person stressed in the two cultures. In particular, the American's explanation appeared based, in part, on the culturally derived premise that agents possess enduring generalized dispositions and constitute the primary locus of moral responsibility. The Hindu's focus on contextual factors, in contrast, appeared

informed by a culturally derived view of persons as highly vulnerable to situational influences and of the social role as basic normative unit.

Miller's coding scheme is presented in Table 3-1.¹ Based in part on a system for analyzing human motivation developed by Burke (1969), the scheme identifies global distinctions that, it may reasonably be assumed, are universal. Designed for use in cross-cultural developmental research on social explanation, the scheme permits exhaustive coding of subjects' free responses. Major distinctions are made between reasons referring to: (a) the agent, including the agent's general dispositions (e.g., "Agent A is insecure") and specific aspects (e.g., "Agent A felt hungry"); to (b) the context, including the social/spatial/temporal location (e.g., "he was the oldest brother"), aspects of persons other than the agent (e.g., "Agent A's friend was feeling tired") and impersonal aspects of the context (e.g., "The sidewalk was icy"); and to (c) acts or occurrences ("he walked outside"; "it started to rain"). Simultaneous references to the agent and to the context are encompassed under a combination category (e.g., "they [the agent and his sister] were pleased by the news"). Three additional categories exist to accommodate remarks that do not mention a reason for the behavior being explained. These include categories of rejected or mitigating reasons (e.g., "it wasn't because she is kind"; "he helped even though she was a total stranger"), extraneous comments, and questionable remarks.

Social Construction: How Is it Possible?

We conclude with a theoretical discussion of category formation. Throughout this chapter we have adopted a social construction approach to the analysis of cross-cultural variations in concepts of the person. We argued that the way individuals perceive, describe, and explain each other's behavior is decisively influenced by received conceptualizations of the person in relationship to the moral-social order and the natural order. We contrasted duty-based and role-based moral orders with rights-based and individual-based moral orders. We assumed that even though each society viewed its own moral code as "natural," there was no logical, prudential, or evidential grounds for selecting one type of moral order over the other. Societies, we implied, were "free" to construct themselves in one way or the other, history being the only constraint. We conceptualize the "person" the way we do, we implied, not because that is the way the person intrinsically is, not because that is the way we intrinsically are, but because that is the kind of conceptualization of the person that is presupposed by our social order and a requisite for its

¹A detailed description of the coding scheme may be obtained by writing to the author.

Table 3-1. Outline of Scheme for Coding Explanations

- I. Agent
 - A. General dispositions
 1. Personality (individual nature)
 2. Common disposition
 3. Value, attitude
 4. Preference, interest
 5. General capability, knowledge
 6. Physical characteristics
 - B. Specific aspects
 1. Purpose
 2. Instinct
 3. Feeling
 4. End in itself
 5. Specific ability, knowledge
 6. Physical state
- II. Context
 - A. Social/spatial/temporal location
 1. Social norm, regulation
 2. Descriptive references to enduring aspects
 3. Descriptive references to transient aspects
 - B. Aspects of persons other than agent
 1. General aspects
 2. Specific aspects
 - C. Impersonal aspects
 1. Enduring aspects
 2. Transient aspects
- III. Acts/occurrences
 - A. Recurrent act or occurrence
 - B. Nonrecurrent act or occurrence
- IV. Agent/context combination
 - A. Personality/social norm
 - B. Common disposition/social norm
 - C. Mutual purpose
 - D. Mutual feeling
- V. Other
 - A. Rejected or mitigating reason
 - B. Extraneous comment
 1. Narrator's opinions, observations, qualifications
 2. Repetition or rephrasing of narration of behavior
 3. Narration of outcomes
 4. Narration of other information not part of explanation
 - C. Questionable comment—unscorable

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functioning (see Shweder, 1984, for an extended discussion of the nonrational foundations of society).

The social construction theory, however, is not the only theory of category formation, and in recent years a powerful alternative approach has been