

Reflection and Rationality

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Richard Shweder's essay came attached to an e-mail, and when I clicked on my computer to open it up, I was confounded by the following message: "The document you are opening contains macros or customization. Some macros contain viruses that could harm your computer. If you are sure this document is from a trusted source click 'enable macros.' If you are not sure click 'disable macros.'" Well, I had never met Shweder, but I have been a fan of his ever since I read his thoughtful and provocative book, *Thinking Through Culture*, but, and I hope you will excuse this, I disabled macro anyway.

A few years ago I was asked to give a keynote address before the Japanese Educational Studies association. When the address was over a couple of my former students, knowing my fondness for Japanese food took me out for a farewell dinner. The meal was as elegantly served as any that I had ever had, with the sashimi, or raw fish remolded back onto its skeleton and decorated with appropriate garnishes of many shapes and colors. There was also the usual miso soup, sukiyaki dishes and many traditional plates that I could not name. As the conversation progressed I became subliminally aware of a movement, an awareness that did not rise to the level of consciousness until I felt it again, but dismissed it as perhaps the result of a bit too much sake. The third time I sensed the movement, I looked up and saw that the fish mold was actually shivering — probably a post-mortem response to a difficult death. Clearly, I had some decisions to make. I could, given my feeling of discomfort, refuse the fish. But I could see no way to do so politely, given that my students had ordered the meal knowing my fondness for sushi and sashimi. I picture the effect on them of hearing, yes I did say that I loved sashimi, but I lied. Moreover, these were students who I had not seen for a few years, and I was especially fond of them.

I had a decision to make and while I was not aware of any conscious deliberation at the time, I suppose it was conducted subconsciously and probably went something like this. First I had to bring my perception of movement and my feeling of revulsion to consciousness. Second, I needed to make my own feeling into an object of deliberation — was the feeling the result of an inherently repulsive object, or might it be the result of a social construct that I had learned to naturalize? This process occurred in stages. First I recalled the look of bewilderment and muffled disgust of the face of some Asian guest in my home a few years before when I started to carve up a twenty-pound turkey on the *very* table they were eating at. Only barbarians I learned later would do something like that. Civilized people operated on their meat in the kitchen and away from the sensitive eyes of a guest. I could reverse the situation, likening the feelings of my guests towards me at that time to my feeling as a guest now. If they could excuse my turkey, then I could do the same for their squirming fish. Also, I had no reason to think that my former my students would wish me harm, and moreover, *they* were eating the fish. Also, I do eat raw fish in restaurants at home, fish not nearly as fresh as the one that sacrificed his life for this

meal. All of this deliberation came to a head in the practical conclusion — just go ahead and eat the fish. And, I must say it was delicious.

I want to use this adventure to illustrate some of the points that Shweder made about the process of intercultural evaluation. In this engagement there are two objects of evaluation. The most obvious is the cultural practice that evokes a negative feeling such as revulsion, disgust, contempt, pity, fear. The less obvious object of evaluation is the negative feeling itself. To make this into an object of evaluation we need to understand how such feelings may be used to police the moral boundaries of our own society. Thus, the engagement with an other culture becomes an opportunity to reflect upon one's own cultural norms. These two stages take the process beyond Bush's absolutism where all is evaluated from the unreflective premises of one's own group. However, there is a third stage that takes it beyond simple relativism of Posner. Here Shweder proposes that when evaluating the cultural practices of others that we make sure that those evaluations are based on good empirical evidence and on a comprehensive understanding of the various goods that can be manifested in different cultural practices.

I agree with much of this, but I also want to raise a problem that is fundamental to education in a pluralist society. The problem is that very young children do not a culture have. Their parents may be said to have a culture, although as I will show in a moment, this is problematic in an important way. And, given that their parents may have a culture, we may believe that it is, everything else being equal, best if parents raise their own children appropriating as they do so, their own cultural supports and their own cultural horizons. However, a parent's rights over a child, and therefore the right of a group to educate children in their own image are limited by at least two factors. The first is the right of the child to be able to participate both in the local culture and in the larger society and the second is the right of members of other cultural groups to a reasonable level of respect.

I mention this rather obvious fact for two reasons. First, I think Shweder actually implicitly agrees with them perhaps not in any obvious verbal formulation, but in the very practices he recommends. To make one's own feelings into objects of evaluation is to propose a norm of intercultural respect that adds an additional layer to group membership, a layer that is consistent with liberal pluralism. The second reason arises out of a concern for the way in which Shweder's argument may be read. Shweder rightly rejects both the absolutism of Bush and the relativism of Posner. Yet it is not difficult to suggest that he may be advancing a certain touchstone for determining the goodness of culture, and that there is danger that this be converted into an absolute. I think that there are two that he seems to favor. The first is the coherence of a cultural practice and its ability to bind the individual to the supports that the culture has to offer. The second is the testimony of the informed cultural member. Both of these are important, but each is also problematic. Internal coherence and support may not be sufficient to generate the requisite amount of respect for members of other groups and an internal informant may become so committed to a task, such as the Tuskegee experiment, or the practice of circumcision that they are unable to evaluate its merits in light of other alternatives.

One final point by way of conclusion. I am uncomfortable with the idea that people belong to cultures in the sense that culture determines their horizons of values and understanding. My own view is that human beings are engaged in networks of meaning, and that each of us differs somewhat regarding the various strands that form our particular nodes within those networks. For any two individuals the strands may be relatively thick, requiring limited explanation, or relatively thin, requiring a lot of explanations or gestures. I suspect that an approach that views culture not in terms of epistemological or axiological constraints but rather in terms of networks of meaning and value could result in a stronger dialogical approach to cultural difference, one more appropriate for a normatively pluralist society in process where we want both groups and individuals to flourish.