

**Meta-Language
for
Ethical Reasoning**

Ralph C. Ennis

Meta-Language for Ethical Reasoning

The ability humans, across cultures and languages, have to communicate meanings to each other from a young age suggest a genetic transmission of this ability. The human predilection to form meanings, communicate ideas, and reason ethically is ubiquitous. And children access this genetically transmitted ability at an early age as they are exposed to a sea of language around them.

In this article, I will assume a panhuman DNA transmitted ability to reason ethically. This assumption is based on several extrapolated observation: 1) Almost all young children, across cultures, acquire language through assessing their genetically transmitted ability within language environments, 2) young children want to be treated fairly (an ethical construct) and exhibit disappointment when they are not fairly treated¹, and 3) young children learn to reason about ethical subjects based on a genetically transmitted and culturally honed ability to reason and make meanings.

John Mikhail (2007) poses the question “Is there a universal moral grammar, and if so, what are its properties?”² To reframe that question for this paper: “Is there a set of universal understandings, i.e. an ethical DNA, that surfaces in children and is shaped and solidified through cultural influences that account for ethical reasoning which in turn supports ethical rules of thumb (e.g. norms, laws)?”

Ethical discussions have never been simple. The related questions of authority and reasoning – “Who has the right to say what is good and evil?” and “What reasoning grounds ethical norms grounded?” – plague the discussion from the beginning. And in today’s world, ethical decision making in multicultural, spiritually pluralistic, postmodern contexts is at best problematic, at worst chaotic.

In a multicultural world, the task of finding an authority for ethics that is reliable across cultural differences would require sifting through ethical norms of a multitude of nationalities and ethnicities to establish a few panhuman commonalities that would then be debatable. In a spiritually pluralistic world, each religion vies for the right to provide global ethical guidance—no singular religion is recognized as the one world religion. If religion, a traditional source of ethical rules and reasoning, is to engage in global ethical complexities, religious differences must be accounted for within that ethical reasoning. In a postmodern

¹ Smith, C., Blake, P., Harris, P.: I should but I won't: Why young children endorse norms of fair sharing but do not follow them. *Plos One* 10.1371 (2013)

² Mikhail, John (2007), “Universal moral grammar: theory, evidence and the future.”

world, the task of finding a reliable foundation for ethical reasoning can dissolve into an erosion of all epistemological foundations due to an inherent uncertainty in language and dispersion of an author's presence from his/her context of communication. Thus, ethical discussions often shift from a pursuit of universal ethics to more local interpretations of good and evil by individuals, nationalities, ethnicities and/or religious communities.

The stakes for establishing a culture-general language, a meta-language, for ethical reasoning have never been higher. The global ecosystem is now substantially managed by humanity. As governments, corporations and individuals strive for and against each other, this ecosystem is the precious jewel in the middle of the debates. History now places a high risk on the ethical decisions of humanity—the sustainability of an ecosystem suitable for survival of biodiversity including humans. In particular, human decisions that impact atmospheric gases, life in the oceans, the genetics of the food chain, atomic energy, wars, an emerging artificial general intelligence and many other factors, these propel humanity to a new requirement of ethical reasoning.

We must establish a way to substantially agree on ethical reasoning across cultures and act for the good of the whole or suffer probabilistic negative global consequences within this century. Philosophical ethics and practical ethical decision making need to be congruent as humanity seeks to negotiate the options available within this multicultural, spiritually pluralistic, postmodern and technological world.

Many of our ethical challenges did not exist 100 years ago. The advance of technology has propelled us into a new age for ethical norms—norms that must be global in their applicability. The prospect of system-wide consequences across the entire planet and their impact on societies—these prospects beseech humanity to reason ethically. And this will require a meta-language for ethical decisions, a language that would have fluidity across cultures, languages and circumstances. Easily translated into other language systems, this language would be accessible through the transmission of DNA and sophisticated through a lifetime of ethically laced experiences in multicultural contexts.

The task of this article is to posit culture-general constructs that may be used for ethical reasoning in a multicultural world. This language construct will allow us to reason together about ethics in a more productive manner. The goal is to establish a way of reasoning that can produce an array of ethical norms. The test of these constructs will reside in the question: Do children have an innate capacity to reason in this manner? They may not articulate the constructs, but do they observably employ them?

In this paper, I posit that a construct of ethical reasoning across cultures can be perceived by reflecting on dynamic beauty—the dynamic management of creative harmony established through negotiating jealousy

entangled spaces. The focus of this ethical reasoning is creative harmony within a system and among members of the system. This system and its members occupy various overlapping spaces. And those spaces are often jealousy owned. The emotionality of jealousy entangles property ownership—physical properties (including personal bodies and inanimate structure) and intellectual properties (including personal minds and external memories).

Dynamic beauty is achieved, managed and sustained within the system through a creative harmony of jealous space. A look at beauty, jealousy, space and creative harmony in relation to ethical reasoning follows. All of these reasoning continuums are held to be observable within young children. Thus I speak of an ethical DNA that when accessed can help us negotiate the quandaries of human relations.

A first step toward agreement and action on ethical parameters is a culture-general language that facilitates productive dialogue among parties with competing interest. Without common language constructs of ethics, the task before humanity can dissolve into unproductive haggling and even wars from various causes. At an abstract level, that language can be conceptualized as negotiating creative harmony within jealous space thus negotiating beauty and minimizing ugliness. Beauty can be conceived as displaying creative harmony amidst space that is jealousy held. Similarly, ugliness can be posited as displaying disharmonious envied or aversive spaces. The good and evil of beauty and ugliness is a matter of negotiating jealous space.

The notion of dynamic (i.e. non-stagnant) beauty—expressed as creative harmony within jealous space—can be applied to ethical reasoning across the human experience, e.g. in sexual relations, commercial real estate industry, geriatric medicine, global banking, endangered species, patents and copyrights, global governance, and artificially intelligent robots.

Sexual beauty will be examined here due to the primacy of ethical choices involved within this panhuman pleasure-reproduction-socialization-meanings making enterprise—an enterprise essential to the survival of the species. A sexual beauty ethic can be viewed as a high impact ethic within the human social system, i.e. many choices that impact the global economy and ecosystem can be linked to sexual beauty.



For instance, physical appearance and social image are involved in the dynamic management of sexual beauty. Physical appearance choices (by over seven billion people) directly impact the economies of the clothing, food and

health industries. Choices involved in the management of social image impact the housing, automotive, travel, entertainment, energy and banking industries, and political choices. Thus, the direct and indirect impact of these industries on the ecosystem can be influenced—as a contributing factor with varying impact—by the cumulative ethical decisions of the global population related to sexual beauty.

The link between beauty and jealous space is intuitive. Beauty reveals a variable emotional attraction focused on some spatial object or abstraction that is spatially grounded (as all abstractions have some spatial grounding). This emotional attraction can be conceptualized as a jealousy—a desire to possess for oneself (including shared possessions) that which is deemed valuable. Space that is jealously possessed and is in creative harmony with other jealously held space is deemed beautiful across cultures. However, when one space is jealousy possessed by conflicting parties, these jealousies (i.e. often destructive envies) produce an ugliness that can lead to brutal conflicts (e.g. murders, wars). Thus, the underlining dynamics of jealous space is intrinsically embedded within human reasoning on a beauty-ugliness continuum.

The link between jealous and space is also intuitive. Humanity can be both jealous *for* and jealous *of* spatial objects and ideations of spatial objects at various levels of abstraction. (One can be jealous for one's philosophical models – i.e. “This is *my* philosophical stance”). A link between jealous space as an underlying concept within all ethical reasoning can be found in the “unfair” emotional reaction to the violation of jealously possessed space. For example, if a person jealously possesses the space of his/her own sexual body and someone attempts to enter that body space without permission, then an internal emotional reaction will occur that labels this intrusion as an unfair violation, that this act is an ugliness warranting the label “evil”. Thus, it is culture-general to discuss and condemn the ethical ugliness of sexual rape.

Another example of jealous space that evolved into cruel ugliness is the Rwandan genocide of 1994 in which some 800,000 people were killed in 100 days. One people group, the majority Hutus, negotiated their physical and conceptual space (i.e. their ethnic identities attached to physical space of people, land and other properties) with a jealousy that became envious, over-possessive and oppressive of the minority Tutsis. This negotiation of jealous space allowed an ethical justification for the evil of genocide—a justification acceptable at that time to many Hutus while being totally unacceptable to all Tutsis.

Beauty and *ugliness* are on the same reasoning continuum. Degrees of beauty are compared with degrees of ugliness. Consistent with the above definition of beauty, ugliness is posited as the violation of creatively harmonious jealousy space, thus disharmony of envied space. The comparative difference is primarily within the definitions of jealousy and envy. Healthy jealousy is a jealousy “*for*” something or someone with an established right of ownership, while envy is a jealousy “*of*” something or someone with no established right of

ownership.³ For instance, societies agree that parents have some limited right of ownership to their children. For a parent to be jealous “*for*” the space of his/her child is a beautiful act of creative harmony. However, when a parent becomes jealous “*of*” (i.e. envious of) the child, something very different occurs, something very ugly. To be jealous “*of*” is an intrusion of someone else’s (individual or shared) owned space. Jealousy “*of*” is a desire (and sometimes an act) to invade the space of another and take from him that which he possesses. This envy, this over-possessive, misdirected and deformed jealousy, can undermine the parent-child relationship while a proper sense of jealousy “*for*” a child can help protect and develop a child who is cherished within that possessive jealousy. Parental jealousy “*for*” can nurture the child and enhance dynamic beauty while envy, jealousy “*of*”, can rob the child of the space necessary for protection and development—an ugliness that can plague a child well into adulthood.

Previously the idea of fairness was suggested as an ethical construct. A state of fairness can be perceived as creative harmony of jealous space. When “unfair” becomes a judgment by an individual or group, then someone is experiencing a disharmony of envious space.

The following sections describe continuums and central constructs for logics and imagination that dictate ethical reasoning and are deemed panhuman. Thus, the below is posited as DNA for ethical reasoning. Some of these DNA perspectives dominate in one cultural context more than in others. Some perspectives are applied to certain circumstances but not to others. A person’s relation to a specific group may influence which ethical perspective he employs. Someone within the in-group may receive radically different ethical treatment from someone outside that group. Some of the continuum may be preferred over others in particular cultural contexts. However, all continua are posited to be at play in all ethical decision making to varying degrees of influence.

Logic of Intellect

Humans make logical choices with their intellectual abilities. Below is a way of conceptualizing those logics of intellect. The aim here is to briefly put forth intuitive evidence that these are panhuman continuum of logic of intellect thus supporting the use of them in ethical reasoning across cultures. For an expanded description of these logics see: A Theoretical Model for Research in Intercultural Decision Making, Ennis (2004).

³ Clanton, G. (1998). A sociology of jealousy. In G. Clanton & L. G. Smith (Eds.). *Jealousy* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: University Press of America. 297-312

1. **Accuracy-Intuitive.** Ethical behavior includes verbal and non-verbal truth-telling that is accurate and intuitively consistency. Courts of law often require witnesses to vow to tell the truth, to be accurate.
2. **Powerful-Powerless.** Protection of the powerless (esp. babies, elderly, infirmed) is foundational to the continuation of in-groups and embedded in the logic of intellect. Choices that negotiate the flows of power among humans are ethical decisions.
3. **Good-Evil.** The very fact that all cultures have some sense of good and evil, even though they may disagree on the details, is an indication of an ethical DNA. The concept of fairness (not necessarily equality) underpins this ethical reasoning. Laws (including permission, restriction, innocence, guilt, condemnation and mercy) are designed to manage good-evil within a society.
4. **Space.** Mental and physical spatial ownership (individual and/or corporate) is central to logic of intellect. Many wars have and continue to be fought over spatial ownership of land. And spaces (physical and abstract) are the objects of our ethical exercises.

Logic of Emotion

Not only are logics of intellect employed in human decision making, our emotional logics come into play as we make choices, including ethical choices. Those logics can be conceptualized as the below three emotional continuums. These continuums have previously been used to map the 34 emotional categories addressed in the PAD (Pleasure – Arousal – Dominance) Emotional-State Model by A. Mehrabian.^{4 5} Again the aim here is to provide intuitive evidence that these are panhuman logics of emotions.

1. **Freedom-Bonding.** In ethical reasoning, this continuum is best understood at the extremes of abandonment and bondage. Human bonding (i.e. attachments) is essential for procreation and socialization of the young.
2. **Honor-Shame.** The management of ethical behavior often comes through positive rewards that honor people and negative rewards that shame them.

⁴ Mehrabian, A. (1995). Framework for a comprehensive description and measurement of emotional states. *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs*, 12 (3), 339-361.

⁵ Ennis, R. (2010). Presentation of the Thought Dynamo Decision Mapping Model. (unpublished presentation). Pages 51-58.

Guilt (for behavioral misconduct) is seen as affiliated with shame (a sense of flawed identity that accounts for misconduct).

3. **Trust-Fear.** A breach of relational trust is often considered a moral failure.
Legal contracts are formed to define, ensure, to fortify verbal trust. Fear of the consequences of broken trust often helps negotiate trust relationship. Trust ..
fear is basic within all human relationships and their ethical choices.
4. **Jealousy.** Jealousy has two sides – jealous “*for*” and jealous “*of*”. The latter is better referred to as envy. Jealousy can be posited as the central construct of all emotions and thus the central emotional construct of ethical reasoning. To cease to be jealous “*for*” someone that relies on that jealousy can be considered a breach of ethics. Jealousy is an emotion that is evident in babies prior to age one. ⁶

Imagined Outcomes

Human imagination propels humanity into an uncertain future where our longings may be ameliorated. Without imagination, change would simply be unthinkable though change would still occur (due to impact of movement within space-time). We temper our imaginations by anticipating outcomes of actions driven by our imaginations. We anticipate outcomes of our thoughts and behaviors with varying degrees of accuracy. Below are three continuum that conceptualize our imagined outcomes.

1. **Desired-Undesired Identity.** To violate someone’s group identity is an ethical choice that is seen as evil (in varying degrees) by the offended group.
2. **Thriving-Surviving.** The ethics of thriving involves the surviving of others since we are all dependent beings (i.e. not self-sustaining). For instance, providing medical care to a destitute person is an ethical issue of survival. To refuse care in order to allow thriving for non-destitute persons is an ethical choice.
3. **Meaningful-Meaningless.** Religious belief systems are designed to bring meaning into human existence of birth-life-death. To violate these meanings can be considered an unethical act.

⁶ Masciuch, S. and Kienapple, K. (1993). The Emergence of Jealousy in Children 4 Months to 7 Years of Age. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* August 1993 10: 421-435

4. **Creative Harmony.** The central construct of imagined outcomes is creative harmony. This ethical concept helps maintains the goodness of perpetrating harmonious health in individuals and society. The violation of creative harmony—a destructive dissonance—can be viewed as ethically wrong under certain but not all circumstances. And yet it is always an ethical choice.

Each of the above central constructs can be seen as the intersection of the continuums to which they are associated. See Appendix A for a diagram that depicts these relationships. In addition, the three 3-D axes can be seen as overlapping and thus forming the central construct of dynamic beauty—creative harmony of jealous space.

Aspects of Dynamic Ethical Reasoning

Within the play of the above logics and imagined outcome, several other constructs are necessary. The below factors along with the above continuums provide a language for ethical reasoning that seeks as its goal dynamic beauty.

1. **Paradoxes.** The ethics of paradoxes suggests that contradictory stances may both be ethical when understood by paradoxical reasoning.
2. **Probabilistic cause and effect.** Over time one learns that certain causes will result in a probabilistic range of effects. For instance, destruction of endangered animals is viewed as unethical since the probable consequences may include eliminating a species within the ecosystem and impacting the entire ecosystem thus reducing dynamic beauty.
3. **Intent.** If a person intended good, and harm occurred, this is often judged differently from intended harm. Unintended consequences must be accounted for in ethical reasoning.
4. **Integrity.** The use of emotions or intellect to deceive within one's in-group is usually viewed as unethical.
5. **Authority.** Challenging established authority is often considered unethical.
Every government relies on the concept of authority to enforce ethical behavior of its citizenry.
6. **Love.** Love is determined by the hearts and minds of individuals and societies. Love as an ethic is always nebulous. However, love may motivate many ethical pursuits. Moreover, the absence of love, when love is expected, or the presence of hate invokes ethical choices. Love can be

conceptualized as the internal dynamics of beauty, and beauty as the outward evidence of love in action—that is, creative harmony of jealous space.

7. **Beauty.** Beauty is posited as the creative harmony of jealous space—the central construct of the three overlapping 3-D axes of logic of intellect, logic of emotions and imagined outcomes. The preservation and extension of beauty and avoidance of ugliness forms the play of ethical reasoning.

Utility of Meta-Language

Society has its rules that are often clearly stated as laws or assumed as unwritten norms. However, the deep reasoning that underpins these rules often goes unnoticed. What makes a rule, any rule, sensible? Our deep reasoning, biologically passed from one generation to another, is the foundation of those ethical choices.

Consider an ethical choice in the negative: It is unethical to steal. What supports this basic rule of humanity? Using the presented meta-language of ethical DNA reasoning, we can unpack the sensibility of that rule. Stealing implies a person takes into his or her possession that which another person or group of people claim as their own. Stealing implicates a violation of ownership. That ownership is wrapped in human emotionality involving jealousy. Thus the disruption of harmony between person and spatial objects is the play of stealing. If however, we negotiate the exchange of property with acceptable jealousies (i.e. money for object), then a creative harmony is achieved and dynamic beauty is sustained.

Meta-Language and Local Language

Obviously, not all languages across cultures construct each of the continuum as presented within this paper exactly the same. However, local language conceptions can be mapped using these meta-language continuums. This has previously been illustrated by the parsing of the Japanese construct “*amae*”⁷ onto the nine continuums⁸. *Amae* has no English translation and yet the ethical DNA continuums can be used to parse this Japanese construct (see Appendix C).

⁷ Doi, T. (1981). *The anatomy of dependency: The key analysis of Japanese behavior*. Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha International.

⁸ Ennis, R. (2004): A theoretical model for research in intercultural decision making. *Intercultural Communication Studies*. 8:113-124

Special Case: Ethical Artificial General Intelligence

As we journey into an unknown future, we may well encounter the need to negotiate ethical choices between humans and artificial general intelligent (AGI) agents. How will they make ethical choices? The option of establishing a set of rules that AGI will maintain across cultures is problematic. Rules require reasons in order for a sensibility of ethics to be maintained in human culture—thus the need to establish an ethical DNA for AGI reasoning. The ethical DNA model detailed in this paper has also been suggested as a programmable way forward for ethical AGI.⁹

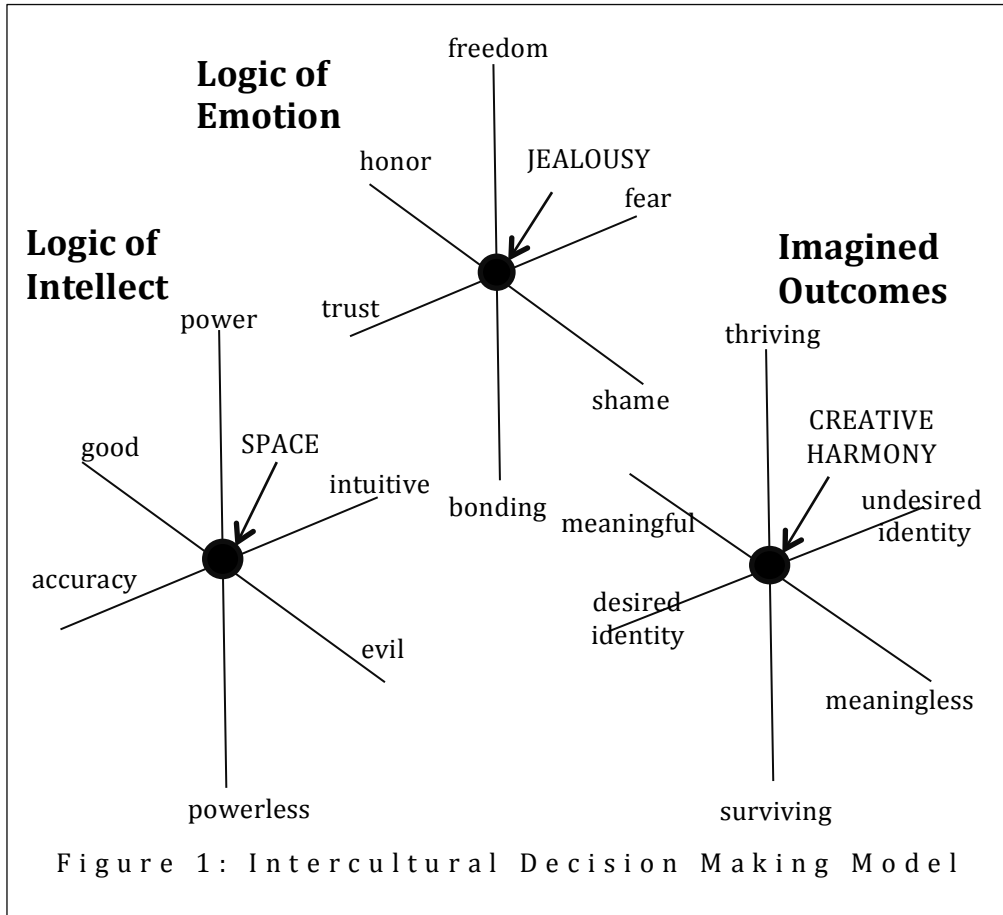
Concluding Thought

The construct of dynamic beauty as creative harmony of jealous space holds promise as a meta-language in negotiating the abstract and practical ethical discussions of our day across cultural distinctions. In going forward an analysis of ethical reasoning patterns across cultures is needed. This analysis can serve to enhance a meta-language driven by beauty as creative harmony of jealous space.

⁹ Ennis, R. (2013). Ethical DNA model for artificial general intelligence. *The 10th International Conference on Modeling Decisions for Artificial Intelligence* (2013). Pages 56 -67 in USB Proceedings. ISBN: 978-84-695-9120-8

Appendix A: Intercultural Decision Making Model

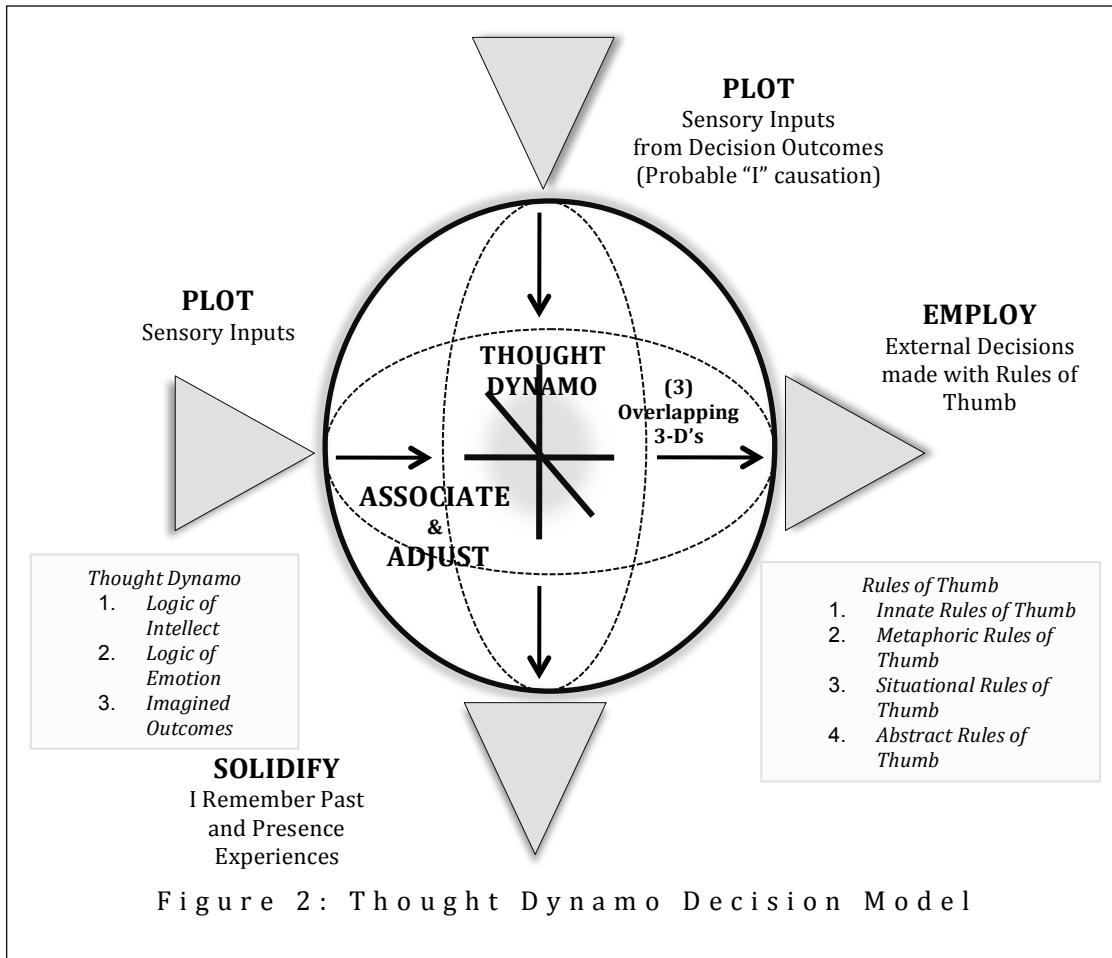
This meta-language for ethical reasoning is based on an intercultural decision making model¹⁰ that includes a dynamic of thought (logic of intellect, logic of emotion and imagined outcomes—see figure 1) as well as a process of decision making that involves input, associations, adjustments, solidify, goal seek, employment, and feedback (see Appendix B).



¹⁰ Ennis, R. (2004): A theoretical model for research in intercultural decision making. *Intercultural Communication Studies*. 8:113-124

Appendix B: Thought Dynamo Decision Model

The intercultural decision making model resides within a broader model of thought and decision making depicted below as a Thought Dynamo Decision Model.



Appendix C: Parsing the Japanese Construct *Amae*

Logic of Intellect	
Powerful – powerless	<i>Amae</i> requires the powerlessness of receiving and yields the power of being provided for.
Good – evil	<i>Amae</i> requires an acknowledgement of good in one’s in-group and holds that evil is betrayal of one’s in-group.
Accuracy – intuition	<i>Amae</i> requires intuition to negotiate relationships and assumes the accurate interpretation of <i>amae</i> as a social construct.
Space	<i>Amae</i> requires the negotiation of space between two or more people.
Logic of Emotion	
Trust – fear	<i>Amae</i> requires trust in other(s) and it implies the fear of being betrayed by others.
Honor – shame	<i>Amae</i> requires the honor of submitting to another’s will and it forbids the shame of betraying another.
Freedom – bonding	<i>Amae</i> requires the bonding of dependency and yields the freedom of dependency.
Jealousy	<i>Amae</i> requires the management of a privileged and thereby jealous relationship between people.
Imagined Outcomes	
Surviving – thriving	<i>Amae</i> views the proper networking of relationships for both surviving and thriving.
Desired identity – undesired identity	<i>Amae</i> views self as dependent as a desired identity and views the absence of a dependent relationship as an undesired identity.
Meaningful – meaningless	<i>Amae</i> views the parent-child relationship as the fundamental meaningful relationship and the absence of <i>amae</i> as fundamentally a meaningless existence.
Creative harmony	<i>Amae</i> requires both persons in an <i>amae</i> relationship maintain and creatively enhance harmony

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