**Individualistic and Communitarian Ethics: Binary Opposites or Complementary Perspectives?**

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**Abstract**

*The notion of the individual self has unduly influenced social research ethics at the expense of communitarian perspectives that situate people as always being in relationship and in community. In this article I argue that a better approach would interweave collective and individual perspectives, building on the richness of both traditions. The idea of ethics implies something fundamentally social, invoking cultural norms of appropriateness. Yet the measures of ethical impact are often constrained to a range of individual responses or aggregated perspectives. What is missing is the element of community connectedness, the network of relationships that define the social context. That is the aspect that I explore here. This has particular relevance in Aotearoa/New Zealand with the Māori emphasis on connectedness and the Pākehā traditions emphasising separateness.*

**Keywords:** ethics, individual, community, collective, poststructural, Māori

### Perspectives on Ethics: Common Concerns and Multiple Voices

“… ethics is obliged to acknowledge a moment of rebellious heteronomy that troubles the sovereignty of autonomy” (Critchley, 2007, p. 37).

In this article I investigate the ethics associated with *being* as an individual while constructed in community. The main focus of the article is the contrasting of individualistic and communitarian perspectives as foundations for ethical inquiry. Since Aotearoa/New Zealand is the context for my thinking, I also examine Māori and Pākehā cultural perspectives on research ethics, from the viewpoint that the different understandings value separateness and connectedness and that greater benefits would accrue from combining … Finally, I apply a poststructural lens to the blending of individual and communitarian perspectives.

Concepts of ethics are culturally connected ideas of appropriateness, boundaries, expectations and truth. Because they are culturally specific, there are differences between the interpretations that different communities place on similar behaviours. Accordingly, being sensitive to context is vital to determine what is appropriate and acceptable. Such contextual understandings are acted out by community insiders, but often observable by outsiders.

Some literature that locates the concept of the ‘individual’ within a Western tradition of philosophy forms my starting point. In particular, I first consider the notion of an ‘essential self’. From that beginning I move on to outlining communitarian perspectives and group understandings as found in some non-Western settings. I argue that there are benefits to be found from connecting these different approaches of individual and collective understandings. This leads me into a discussion of the distinct perspectives on ethics viewed through those different lenses. Following that, I shift to the related conceptions of fairness and consider them through the same lenses, with particular reference to the ideas of privilege and equity. I conclude with a summary of my argument and some suggestions.

### Western Philosophy: Ideas of the Individual and the Essential Self

The notion of the individual in Western philosophy is strongly linked to the idea that each of us is unique. This way of thinking is predicated on the idea of each individual having an essential *self*, quite distinct from others. On the one hand this idea requires a recognition and perhaps a valuing of differences, but on the other its pervasiveness has overwhelmed the ideas of collective understandings and shared existence. As a consequence, this traditional Western approach does not fit easily with ideas that posit a multiplicity of dynamic selves or identities, such as a socially-constructed approach.

In order to illustrate the differences between traditional and postmodern approaches, I shall start by outlining the positions of Buber and Lévinas - two philosophers who articulate ideas about ethics from the perspective of a ‘self’. In 1923, Buber wrote a very influential essay about the individual entitled: Ich und Du (*I and Thou*) (1962a). Although this explored the theme of relationships, it was predicated on ideas of *selves* as separate and discrete persons. Buber wrote elsewhere of individuals having shared experiences *within* a group experience, but argued that this did not imply any sort of existential relationship, any meaningful connectedness: *Just because you belong to a group, it does not suggest that you have any kind of existential relationship with any others in that group*[[1]](#footnote-1)(1962b). In Buber’s way of thinking, a conversation, a meeting, brought with it the problem of two distinct entities, for each of whom there could only be a partial knowing of the other. For Buber, *the real problem of intersubjectivity is the split between reality (Sein) and appearance (Scheinen)[[2]](#footnote-2)*. Accordingly, reality was only knowable with self-reflection: *What we represent as our philosophical knowledge of what it means to be human essentially requires individuals to first engage in self-reflection and then extrapolate from that as the basis for wider anthropological understandings[[3]](#footnote-3).* Buber posited that such a process was essential to reach a true understanding of philosophical anthropology.

However, Buber’s position does not scale to include other worldviews, other ontologies. Nor does it automatically translate to other cultures, other social dimensions, other ways of being in the world. For example, in his dismissing of most conversation as one-way talk or gossip, Buber was attempting to describe what he perceived as a higher form of human interaction. *Most of what we refer to as conversation these days is probably better described as pontificating[[4]](#footnote-4)*. On the other hand, he wrote that we could only really understand humanity through the interactions of people: *In any attempt to grasp what it means to be human, we must focus, not on individuals in isolation, but instead on interactions, the ways in which we inter-relate, because that is where we can better see our humanity expressed*[[5]](#footnote-5). However, much of what Buber wrote only makes sense to me when viewed through a lens that situates each individual as an essential self, even though he acknowledged the importance of inter-connectedness. In admitting the influence of Kant’s (1800, p. 25) question: “Was ist der Mensch?” (*What is man*?), Buber argued that this brought into focus a place in time — being finite but part of infinity:

*We need to recognize that even as we acknowledge our limitations, the very finite timescale of our lives, we also participate in the infinite. Both the finite and the infinite make an impact on our lives, and together, intertwined, they are threaded through our existence[[6]](#footnote-6)* .

Such thinking appeared to open space for more possibilities, but the underlying assumptions limited the scope for alternative perspectives to be explored and restricted his view of ethics to a specific morality.

Another influential European philosopher in the same tradition, Lévinas, expressed a similar perspective to Buber, and also saw each human as an isolated individual under the gaze of God. Lévinas asserted the proposition that while there is much that is shared with others, in the final analysis, we are unique and separate individuals:

*It’s trite to say that we only exist as individuals when we are surrounded by people and things which we engage with. We interact with others in what we see and in what we touch, in empathizing with others as well as when we are working together. All of these are transitive ways of relating: when I touch something, I see an Other, but I cannot be that other. I am totally unique and individual[[7]](#footnote-7)*.

Lévinas recognized commonality, he accepted that there was much that is shared, but insisted on an *essential self* as a consequence of uniqueness. This position does not invite us to examine or interpret our world and our existence in other ways. The ethical difficulty arises from focusing exclusively on the uniqueness of a person, because doing so marginalizes the far greater impacts of our human connectedness to each other and our contexts.

This might be interpreted as the difference between a psychology of the individual and a sociology of the community, that it is simply a question of what is the more appropriate focus. It may seem to invite a reader to consider these in terms of a binary, even if acknowledging that wisdom can be seen to reside in both perspectives. However, while different branches of philosophy have built on different perspectives, in Western philosophies both the formulations of psychology and sociology appear to have grown from the same fundamentals, the same atomistic view of ‘individual’ human beings.

On the other hand, a more recent German philosopher, Lorenz Puntel (2011), rejects Lévinas’ position, asserting that the arguments are based on untenable assumptions, and that the sharing of existence within a community is in itself something which gives meaning to the philosophical debate about the nature of *being.* Accordingly, Puntel’s position fits well with the perspective and the ethics of socially-constructed identities.

### An alternative perspective — a collective construction of identity

What I have attempted to foreground is a view of the subject as collectively constructed, shaped as an interwoven discursive amalgam of the possible positions available in a context. The positions available to some subjects may constrain or limit the positions available to others. However, I argue that the subjectivities of persons present in any conversation, and therefore the available relationships, are generated in genealogies of inter-related ideas and promoted by contextual factors such as language.

Any movement from an individualistic conception to include communitarian understandings can therefore only be iterative and must carry forward the sum of philosophies and human knowledge that has been constructed on those previous foundations. I base this on the assumption that it is only possible to formulate and communicate new ideas using language and understandings that are already available. Accordingly, it is not trivial to re‑examine the fundamentals of knowledge from the perspective that it is embedded in the individual *and* in community. Lévinas, for example, even in arguing for the idea of separateness, acknowledged that people never exist in isolation, but are always in relationship to other people and their contexts*[[8]](#footnote-8).*

However, it fundamentally changes the ethics of relationships to position people as existing and being *always* in context with community and the environment. Nevertheless, other traditions have created ethics appropriate to the social self espoused in a communitarian perspective, rather than using the autonomous individual as the starting point. For example:

“the Confucian self is a social self, not a self-choosing autonomous individual, and … it is in great harmony with society rather than starkly opposed to it as liberalism contends” (Kim, 2011, p. 113)

“Ubuntu is an African concept of personhood in which the identity of the self is understood to be formed interdependently through community” (Battle, 2009, pp. 1–2)

Different identities become highlighted in asking socially-integrated selves Kant’s core question ““Was soll ich tun?” (Kant, 1787, sec. 8258) — “*what should I do?*”, or more abstractly: “How should one live? How might one live?” (May, 2005, p. 2), because a sense of belonging, of connectedness, can and does steer the thinking and behaviour that is possible and acceptable in a community (Heshusius, 1994). In addition, beliefs that are embedded in cultural contexts also impact on the practical responses to concerns about *being* in a community (Putnam, 2005; Sen, 2009). Saul (1993, p. 8) talks about the ‘illusions’ which impel people to constantly attempt to apply rationality to solve problems. The main illusion driving such thinking is the notion of the autonomous rational being that is implicit in Descartes’ “Ego cogito, ergo sum sive existo” (1644, p. 30) which I am translating as: “I, myself, am *thinking*, and therefore I *am*, or to put it another way, I *exist*”.

Yet Descartes’ thinking was necessarily influenced by his context and the texts that he had access to. For example, the likely influence of Augustine (2009), on the formulation of Descartes’ aphorism can be seen from a millennium earlier:

“I am not at all afraid of the arguments of the Academicians, who say, What if you are deceived? For if I am deceived, I am. For he who is not, cannot be deceived, and if I am deceived, by this same token I am. And since I am if I am deceived, how am I deceived in believing that I am? [F]or it is certain that I am if I am deceived. Since, therefore, I, the person deceived, should be, even if I were deceived, certainly I am not deceived in this knowledge that I am. And, consequently, neither am I deceived in knowing that I know.” (Augustine of Hippo, ca. 410/2009, p. 281)

Descartes promoted the idea that everything in nature had its own essence that was responsible for aspects of character or being (Skirry, 2005). This approach might be regarded as an forerunner of the notion of an essential self and, consequently, of personality and character traits. Equally, however, it might be argued that Descartes’ *essences*, such as animality and rationality, offer similar cognitive approaches to theorizing *being* as do the postmodern concepts of *discourses*. Debate about the nature of the relationship between mind and body continues, as with Deleuze’s argument that learning takes place in the unconscious in an unsubstantial, ethereal link with nature*[[9]](#footnote-9)*.

This line of argument effectively relocates problematic ideas to the domain of metaphysics, and questions of ethics therefore become issues of morality based on beliefs, even though these are necessarily associated with cultural and societal contexts.

### Discourses of accountability and participation

As Aylesworth (2010) notes, Nietzsche saw the Western concept of the “I” stemming from the need for personal accountability, individual ethics. Yet Nietzsche also noted the contextual aspect, that a criminal notices that behaviours are ethical relative to who performs them, when and where*[[10]](#footnote-10)*.

It appears to me that, as a person contributes to the community in which they participate, to that extent they influence the strength of the discourses of involvement, of relationships. In addition, the identity of each individual within a group is shaped by participation in the group (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Ungar, 2000). Accordingly, the discourses and the myths which become integral to group functioning also constrain the range of identity claims available to members.

It is therefore problematic that the ways in which the *self*is conceived in modern Western democracies are shaped by the workings and structures of the “mercantile society” (Lingis, 2007, p. 11) within which people exist. Subjectivities, and relationships with others, are understood in terms of discourses of consumption and technologies of production. Negative consequences for communities result when the concept of the ‘worker’ as a philosophical foundation dominates form and function in social structuring. This can be seen in weakening community provision for *denizens*, as opposed to *citizens* along with a rapid growth of the *precariat* (Standing, 2012) — a growing class of people with little hope of gaining permanent employment status, financial independence, or value in the current globalized economies and marketplace. Such people are trapped in a precarious life because although they often have education and skills, they lack money, mobility and security. As a consequence, they are marginalized in their communities, trapped by inequitable access to resources. Those people exemplify situated ethics and capitalist conceptions of fairness..

### Connectedness and collective realities

Positioning subjectivities within a conception of community makes possible a perspective where demands can be experienced as fixed rules or constraints, or even as flexible guidelines, with both experiences and behaviours moulded by the “circumambient social order” (Harré, 1984, p. 256). Contextual factors are therefore always influencing subjectivities. Other persons, both inside and outside any group or community, are always constantly shaping individual perspectives and perceptions, responses and response-abilities. To varying extents, individuals become aware of the unspoken and the tacitly acknowledged, the taken-for-granted and the less-noticed. Individuals can be seen as integral and contributing parts of a dynamic environment that shifts as they engage and interact, for the discursive landscape morphs with such involvement, even though this generally escapes attention. As Davies remarks, “[a]wareness of being embodied and, in particular, being embodied *in relation to* landscape, is something we have little practice in observing or articulating.” (Davies, 2000, p. 14, italics mine).

In learning to pay greater attention to *inter*-actions, signifiers of the collaborative construction of realities become more visible. Postmodern perspectives on interactions can highlight practices of participation as well as the discourses that produce them. No individual’s views of reality or ethics are then accepted as inherently more truthful than another’s, because in the postmodern condition everything depends on context and viewpoint. Relationships between people can then be seen as fluid, adapting to the different discourses that shape language, thinking, and behaviours. Many postmodern theorists, particularly Foucault (2000), have discussed discourses in terms of power, and described as *dominant* discourses those ideas and practices which appeared to have the greatest influence in a community or culture. However, to characterize some discourses as dominant and others as of lesser significance can reinforce the notion of power as a binary, with ethics also being polarised as a consequence.

Even in describing power in terms of *capability*[[11]](#footnote-11) rather than *force*, the cultural contexts may cause a strong sense of dominance to be attached to the description. Accordingly, the understandings of relationship become tainted. Familiar discursive positioning encourages us to define relationships in terms of connections between *separate* persons. To escape such thinking requires an alternate perspective: as beings continually shaped and reshaped by a panoply of discourses that are themselves adapting to one another in a dynamic inter-*play* rather than a *battle*field. Discourses invite various ways of *being* according to the presence or absence of attendant discourses as well as the contexts in which subjectivities are being produced. To describe such functionings in terms of *competing* discourses limits the possible understandings. Any focus on people or on discourses as entities distinct from each other rather than always connected, encourages habituated patterns of thinking and misses the *inter*-fluence of how the discourses shape individuals and communities. They do not operate in isolation from each other.

Words are used not simply to communicate, but also to develop and maintain a collective group identity (Atkinson, Meade, Venditti, Greenhill, & Pagel, 2008). Loyalty, allegiance and belonging all represent aspects of a collective ethics based on participating and contributing to a group identity. Discursively-constructed identities are not simply contributors to such a group, they are active participants in the collective shaping of both the group itself and the other participants. Accordingly, patterns of behaviour adapt to changing influences as well as constant values and recognizable ‘norms’. Shared performances represent ways of displaying the underlying beliefs (Barad, 2008). Such beliefs, such collective ontologies given life and voice in engagement, can be said to be the substance of a communitarian perspective.

In some cultures, communitarian ways of thinking and behaving make a collective perspective more visible. For example, in a traditional Samoan approach there is a “need to comprehend something in as many ways as possible to construct the composite that finally, more comprehensively allows us to understand an issue, phenomenon or culture” (Anae, 1998, p. 23). Collective understanding allows for collective accountability.

Another collective approach is to be found in the African conception of *ubuntu*, where a person is only considered to be a person because of their relationship to others (Battle, 2009; Swanson, 2007). Ubuntu articulates a form of *collective ethics*, appropriate to its context and purposes — it acknowledges the contributions that everyone makes and their influence, however small.

### Collective research approaches

Collective ethics appear to be marginalized in many forms of Western research where responsibility is placed on the individual researcher. The mechanisms of Western medical research ethics have been extended to include other fields of social science research, ostensibly to promote greater accountability (Dyer & Demeritt, 2009), predicated on a Cartesian dualism of self-other, and privileging the notion of autonomous *individual* research subjects while at the same time, ironically, combining all the data to remove identifiable traces of uniqueness. In 2005 the British Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) accepted that an “emphasis on the individual can seem inappropriate or meaningless in some cultural contexts, where the individual may take less precedence than broader notions of kin or community” (Dyer & Demeritt, 2009, p. 57). However, when the *Framework for Research Ethics* was updated, that acceptance disappeared (Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC], 2012) and an additional emphasis on individual responsibility and accountability took its place.

However, collective ethics need not be absent from Western research. For example, in Aotearoa/New Zealand, a *Kaupapa Māori* approach to research situates participants and researchers as jointly creating the agenda and collectively benefiting from the research process and findings (Bishop, 1996). This approach has already influenced non-Māori research as well, particularly that involving participant-researchers.

Accepting a position of participant-observer in a research setting affords opportunities to become more aware of the ethical aspects of a situated collective research, particularly if post-structural conceptions of identity as described by Jenkins (1996) are adopted. Such conceptions locate identity in *actions* rather than in *essence*. As insiders, researchers participate in the ongoing shaping of an ever-changing group identity, contributing the perspectives produced by the discourses. But participation also makes demands. However, I submit that, from a communitarian viewpoint, the research demands of community are not necessarily even felt as demands, but rather as shared endeavours.

### Toward a collective ethics

It is easy to accept that people act differently in different contexts according to the discursively-constructed constraints, undercurrents or expectations of those contexts. From this perspective, the ethics of a researcher include an ethic of involvement, whether or not the researcher is aware of it, and regardless of their orientation and methods. The nature of researcher involvement, or a lack of it, tacitly signals to the other participants a positioning that privileges individuality or community, a positioning that speaks of separateness between identities and experiences or engagement and interconnectedness. Research *on* others demands differentiation from them. Research *with* others invites involvement: “There is something active about identity that cannot be ignored: it isn't 'just there', it's not a 'thing', it must always be established … identity … [is what] people do … [there is] a degree of reflexivity” (Jenkins, 1996, p. 4). That reflexivity is implicated in research ethics.

Ethics, the shared discourses of morality in the sense of *mores*, show in how ‘selves’ are with others, and with communities of involvement and their genealogies of ideas and ideals. In this view, ethics are discursive constructs, continually shaped and re-shaped by their adaptive contexts. Ethics are intertwined with values and beliefs, dilemmas of practice and problems of privilege. Ethics represent engagements with others and shared understandings of ‘selves’.

A collective ethics acknowledges that group cohesion and identity involve some commonality of understandings, values that are shared. There is therefore some congruence in the discourses that differentiate between the *in*siders and the *out*siders. If one of the tasks or expectations of research is that it might lead to improvements, then alignment is needed between the ethics of the group and the outcomes of the research. Anything else can be seen as marginalizing the group within a wider society. The question that then needs to be addressed is whether any group that is the subject of research for betterment understands the intervention as moving the group closer to the values and normative discourses of others, or enhancing its distinctiveness. The former operates to universalize the human condition, while the latter may create dissonance with societal norms, the outcomes of discursive practices. Such outcomes, projected in the planning and execution of research, represent a postmodern approach to research ethics (Hare-Mustin, 1994). This approach can be seen in Putnam’s (2005) assertion that qualitative research ethics are expected to be contextual, acknowledging the methodological practicalities and peculiarities of each study as well as the impacts of the beliefs and belief structures of both researchers and participants. Ethical considerations are therefore also *instrumental* in that they set boundaries for research studies according to the norms of the wider research community within which any study is situated.

However, research methods and ethics are also shaped by historical influences — they have their own genealogy. Artemidorus (1975), writing in the second century, can be regarded as part of the tradition of combining empirical investigations with studies of the literature for his statement that he has “not only taken special pains to procure every book on the interpretation of dreams, but have consorted for many years with the much-despised diviners of the marketplace” (p. 13). That contrast may indicate that he complied with acceptable practice by referring to literary sources, but at the same time, from his reference to the ‘*much-despised*’, he was assigning value to marginalized forms of knowledge. In effect, this can be taken as an example of where research ethics are shaped by prevailing discourses of morality as much as by practical questions.

An ethics of community, an ethics shared in the practical interpretations of morality, can be expressed as: “an essentially *interpersonal* … aspect of moral obligation” (Darwall, 2009, p. 138, italics in original). However, an *interpersonal* understanding does not necessarily imply a collective or communitarian basis for an ethical conceptualization. In contrast, collective ethics clearly demonstrate both social norms, and also the ways people influence each other as participants in contexts of behaviours and thinking. Such collective influence implies a collective accountability, not replacing an ethic of individual care, but complementing it. To those habituated to ethics of individual responsibility, ethics of community might be more problematic, more ephemeral. But in a socially-constructed worldview, irrespective of what any consideration of ethics is, an ethics of responsibility will be influenced by, and in response to, such discourses as are present in the research context. In  Western contexts it would be difficult to escape being influenced by discourses of the individual, but the question remains — what is privileged and what is marginalized as a result? (Dachler, 2010).

Multiple points of view and differing perspectives provide support for a sharing of responsibility — collective ethics made obvious. The use of language illustrates intersubjectivity (Zlatev, 2008). The meaning of language is influenced by what is regarded as legitimate knowledge (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). However, meaning may also “stand in need of liberation from reason” (Taylor, 1989, p. 116). Just as the identities of famous people form part of community histories while their contemporaries are forgotten, prominent discourses may become the focus of attention as other discourses are ignored. Yet they all have their impacts, the obvious and the unnoticed alike (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). Gergen (2009) is persuasive in arguing for the need to find other ways to understand subjectivities as “constituents of a process that eclipses any individual within it” (p. 129). The challenge is to acknowledge the individual and the community perspectives as complementary rather than alternative aspects. It is not the context, but rather the view of the context that makes the difference.

“Anything - and nothing - is right". And this is the position you are in if you look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in aesthetics or ethics. In such a difficulty always ask yourself: How did we learn the meaning of this word ("good" for instance)? From what sort of examples? In what language-games? Then it will be easier for you to see that the word must have a family of meanings. (Wittgenstein, 2003, p. 31e, §77)[[12]](#footnote-12)

Whether thinking in terms of separateness or connectedness, the morality of *being* in *community* is predicated on what Metz (2010) described as the *capability* for sharing, which includes almost everyone. Despite the apparent contradictions, the notion of *fairness* includes both privilege and equity, just as the notion of *being* includes both individuals and community. They are not mutually exclusive points of view, but rather complementary. Combining both lenses therefore yields a richer picture, whereas favouring one over the other in a binary understanding of truth not only misrepresents the situation, it also diminishes it.

### Māori and Pākehā ethics

As Metz (2015) explains it, labels are a matter of salience, describing noticeable features, so the descriptions of Māori and Pākehā traditions are necessarily fluid, and they do not have fixed boundaries. Many Māori have become highly socialized into Pākehā ways through ongoing exposure to the prevalent individualistic discourses, but that does not imply that they would deny the backdrop and importance of *Te Ao Māori* (the Māori world), and particularly *tikanga* (the Māori way of thinking and doing things). *Tikanga* represents frames of conventions and discourses, which have not remained fixed from some particular time in the past, but have been in a process of continual adjustment to the changes wrought by the influence of Pākehā values and approaches. Nevertheless, for Māori, the emphasis on connectedness remains important. Related to an understanding of collective ethics is the Māori concept of *mana*[[13]](#footnote-13), or the dignity associated with playing a role in a community.

The differences between oral and written traditions are also profound. Māori has a long-term oral language tradition, enhanced since contact with the Pākehā with a written form of the language. Although the different *iwi* (tribes) historically showed language variations which remain as geographically distinct markers in the written forms of record, *te Reo Māori* (the Māori language) includes distinct signifiers for the individual and the group. Equally, the oral histories include stories in the heroic tradition alongside the notion of togetherness — *Te Kotahitanga*.

The differences between Māori and Pākehā perspectives on ethics are visible in the differing approaches to research. On the one hand, Pākehā research ethics assume an orientation towards autonomy, with the attendant individual responsibilities and benefits. On the other hand, *Kaupapa Māori* is a Māori research paradigm that “is collectivistic and is oriented toward benefiting all the research participants and their collectively determined agendas” (Bishop, 1996, p. 19). What the approaches share is an orientation towards learning that is ultimately of benefit to the wider community, whether that be through understandings articulated in separateness or in connectedness.

The cultural dimensions that distinguish Māori from Pākehā ethics, equally apply to the concept of *being*. As with the other ethical considerations, these cultural components are complementary in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Recognising only a single one comes at the expense of deeper understanding, particularly in the field of education where the cultures co-exist.

### A post-structural concept: meaning in an intertwining

From a post-structural perspective, ethics can only be understood *in relationship*, and are never static but contextual. Poststructural perspectives can expose the “fictionality” (Davies et al., 2006, p. 89), the illusory nature of the concept of the individual. Language-in-use, however, both allows the continuation of such fictions and actually promotes them. An alternative, where individual subjectivities are defined and understood to be always in relationship, offers the opportunity to see individuality and collectivity as intertwined. However, the same fictionality applies to the concept of *community*, because that too is ephemeral and dynamic, always equally situated in discourse.

To make sense of the *always-becoming* nature of both individual and collective identities, it is important to adopt the post-structural perspective that these are “never a final or settled matter” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 17). From this viewpoint, the salient aspects of the terms *individual* and *community* are their contextuality and fluidity. Nor are the terms in binary opposition to each other, but rather, as I have already submitted, complementary in their contributions to meaning-making.

Taking the concepts of individual and community as intertwined means accepting the tensions between always-separated and always-connected conceptions of ethics without attempting to resolve them. The notions of *truth*, *rightness*, *responsibility*, *fairness*, *culture* and *identity* are all imbued with meaning through their use in languaged contexts. In language the words are connected by grammar and separated by nuances of meaning. It is the functioning relationships between these that matter.

Equally, the relationship between the different conceptions of ethics can be seen as being both in comparison and in congruity, but always in perspective. Context changes perspective, but descriptors of context limit understandings of multi-dimensionality. Words and language fail just as much as they succeed. The language of ethics includes metaphors as much as signifiers. Metaphors are imperfect, imprecise, and lend themselves to different interpretations. Signifiers claim to correspond to aspects of reality, yet if that is itself a fiction, or better described as multiple realities, then metaphors and signifiers share a dependence on usage. From this reference point, any perspective on ethics precludes fixedness in favour of situatedness. Accordingly, postulating the research ethics that apply to any study requires an acknowledgement of multiplicity.

### Conclusion

In this article I am arguing for an overlapping of perspectives as they apply to the constructs of ethics as understood when aligned with the discourses of individuality and community. I submit that the Western preoccupation with an individual self emphasises a narrow view of ethics, while other conceptions of *being* that locate personhood in community offer a viable alternative that applies more broadly. I have explored the significance of differences between Māori and Pākehā worldviews and the ethical considerations that result. Finally, I have tried to interweave the various perspectives into a post-structural conception of ethics that embraces the multiple viewpoints through a brief consideration of language and meaning-making. It is in the shared activity of language that ethics is assigned meanings.

I have explored the concept of the individual as it occurs within a Western tradition of philosophy, in contrast with communitarian perspectives and understandings of collective *being* and *belonging*. I have drawn from ideas of socially constructed selves to explore the notions of research and ethics within a collective frame of reference, in order to argue that benefits could accrue from finding alternate ways to understand *selves* both as separate persons storied extensively through heroic traditions, and as components with and within collective identities. The challenge is to not only consider collective ethics, but also to support approaches which recognise the interactions that bind people in shared traditions, technologies and theories rather than continuing to focus on a collective belief in individuality at the edges of social connectedness.

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1. “Auf keinen Fall jedoch involviert schon die Mitgliedschaft in der Gruppe eine Wesensrelation zwischen einem Mitglied und dem andern.” (Buber, 1962b, p. 269) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Die eigentliche Problematik im Bereich des Zwischenmenschlichen ist die Zweifalt von Sein und Scheinen.” (Buber, 1962b, p. 273). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Philosophische Erkenntnis des Menschen ist ihrem Wesen nach eine Selbstbesinnung des Menschen, und der Mensch kann sich auf sich selbst eben nur so besinnen, daß sich zunächst die erkennende Person, der Philosoph also, der Anthropologie treibt, auf sich selber als Person besinnt” (Buber, 1962a, p. 315)(p. 315). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Das weitaus meiste von allem, was sich heute unter Menschen Gespräch wäre richtiger, in einem genauen Sinn, als Gerede zu bezeichnen.” (Buber, 1962b, p. 277) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Der Mensch ist nicht in seiner Isolierung, sondern in der Vollständigkeit der Beziehung zwischen dem einen und dem andern anthropologisch existent: erst die Wechselwirkung ermöglicht, das Menschentum zulänglich zu erfassen.” (Buber, 1962b, p. 283) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Es ist also damit gesagt, daß wir **zugleich** und **in einem** mit der Endlichkeit des Menschen seine Teilnahme an der Unendlichkeit erkennen müssen, nicht als zwei Eigenschaften nebeneinander, sondern als die Doppelheit der Prozesse, in der als solcher erst das Dasein des Menschen erkennbar wird. (Buber, 1962b, p. 311). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Il est banal de dire que nous n'existons jamais au singulier. Nous sommes entourés d'êtres et de choses avec lesquels nous entretenons des relations. Par la vue, par le toucher, par la sympathie, par le travail en commun, nous sommes avec les autres. Toutes ces relations sont transitives: je touche un objet, je vois l'Autre. Mais je ne suis pas l'Autre. Je suis tout seul (Lévinas, 2004, p. 21). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “En quoi consiste l'acuité de la solitude? Il est banal de dire que nous n'existons jamais au singulier. Nous sommes entourés d'êtres et de choses avec lesquels nous entretenons des relations” (Lévinas, 2004, p. 21)*.*

*What gives solitude its edge? It’s just trite to say we never exist in isolation. We’re surrounded by people and things that we relate to.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. … les Idées problématiques sont à la fois les éléments derniers de la nature et l'objet subliminal des petites perceptions. Si bien que « apprendre » passe toujours par l'inconscient, se passe toujours dans l'inconscient, établissant entre la nature et l'esprit le lien d'une complicité profonde. (Deleuze, 2011, p. 214)

*... problematic ideas are ultimately just a part of nature and the end results of what we notice without being consciously aware of it. So "getting it" always happens at an unconscious level, it always happens in our unconscious, and that clearly shows the link, the connection between what we think and what is 'out there' in nature*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Unterschätzen wir nämlich nicht, inwiefern der Verbrecher gerade durch den Anblick der gerichtlichen und vollziehenden Prozeduren selbst verhindert wird, seine That, die Art seiner Handlung, *an sich* als verwerflich zu empfinden … Alles somit von seinen Richtern keineswegs *an sich* verworfene und verurtheilte Handlungen, sondern nur in einer gewissen Hinsicht und Nutzanwendung. (Nietzsche, 1887/2011, location 956)

*We shouldn’t underestimate how much simply observing judicial procedures inhibits the criminal from truly understanding that what he has done and how he has behaved are actually reprehensible: because he sees the same sorts of things approved when they are happening in the pursuit of justice, all practised in good conscience … All these things that are used for punishments - none of them are seen by judges as behaviours that are intrinsically warped and misguided acts as such, but only according to their context and implementation.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The French word ‘pouvoir’ used by Foucault carries the sense of ‘capability’, in contrast to the other term ‘puissance’ which means power in the sense of ‘force’. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “Es stimmt alles; und nichts."--Und in dieser Lage befindet sich z.B. der, der in der Aesthetik, oder Ethik nach Definitionen sucht, die unseren Begriffen entsprechen. Frage dich in dieser Schwierigkeit immer: Wie haben wir denn die Bedeutung dieses Wortes ("gut" z.B.) gelernt? An was für Beispielen; in welchen Sprachspielen? Du wirst dann leichter sehen, daß das Wort eine Familie von Bedeutungen haben muß (Wittgenstein, 2003, p. 31, §77) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “*Mana* refers to a transcendant power that demands respect. It carries the weight of a connection to the gods and history, so is much more than simply the status of an important position” (Barlow, 1991, p. 61). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)