

## **Book Review**

### **How Culture Shapes Thought**

Richard E. Nisbett *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . and Why*. New York: Free Press, 2003. ISBN 0-7432-1646-6 (288 pp., \$24).

Richard Nisbett's book *The Geography of Thought* is subtitled *How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . and Why*. Nisbett summarizes a number of studies, including his own, establishing that many Asians and Westerners think differently: Asians, unlike Westerners, have difficulty disentangling objects from their surroundings; Western infants learn nouns more rapidly than they learn verbs, unlike Easterners; Easterners avoid the "fundamental attribution error" of imputing to personality what is a situational factor; and Westerners use formal logic, whereas Easterners entertain contradiction (which, Nisbett adds, can "sometimes be helpful in getting at the truth"). One obvious concern with such stereotypes is that they ignore the vast differences within groups. Nisbett admits the crudity of "East Asian" as a label for billions of people, yet says the generalization is justified (p. xxii). His valuable summary of empirical evidence does seem to establish differences among Asians and Westerners. To give just two examples, Imae and Gentner showed subjects a pyramid made of cork, identified as a "dax," then presented two trays, one having on it an object of the same shape but of a different substance, the other containing cork but in a different shape. When asked to pick out the "dax" on the trays, Americans by far picked the pyramid shape, whereas the Japanese picked the cork substance, indicating Americans coded the object and Japanese coded the substance. In Masuda's fish tank experiment, subjects were shown eight underwater vignettes, each having one or more focal fish and a background of other fish, plants, rocks, etc. After a second showing, subjects were asked to describe what they saw. Japanese subjects made over 60% more references to background features. When shown pictures of 96 objects, half of which they had not seen before, Japanese better recognized objects if the object was shown in its original vignette, suggesting they bind objects to the environment.

The environment in which an object appeared made no difference to the ability of Americans to recognize the object.

Nisbett's account of *why* there are these differences is less convincing. He notes that the ancient Greeks traveled, encountering novel peoples. Athens was "like the bar in Star Wars" (p. 31), and so the Greeks faced conflict and contradiction. In contrast, 95% of the Chinese are Han, a homogeneous group facing little conflict and enjoying only harmony. Not relying solely on this crude evaluation of two complex civilizations, both of which knew both conflict and harmony, Nisbett relates these alleged differences in turn to material conditions: The Chinese were agricultural, hence needed to get along to grow rice and irrigate, whereas Greece, being mountainous, favored hunting and trade, which, he asserts, require little cooperation. Using Herman Witkin's rod and frame test of field dependence, Nisbett notes that agricultural peoples are more field dependent and that hunter-gatherers and industrial peoples are equally field independent, which seems to undermine his historical thesis: If members of industrial societies adapt so as to be field independent, it shouldn't matter what their roots once were, especially in light of another point Nisbett makes, that the cognitive and perceptive capacities he measures can be manipulated or "primed" (pp. 118–119, 227–228). For example, Hong Kong citizens who have both "Asian" and "American" selves can be primed to react as either Easterner or Westerner. Although at one point Nisbett expresses doubt as to whether ways of thinking can be changed, as they are so embedded in perception, philosophy, and temperament (p. 212), he admits that cognitive processes can be modified by living in another culture for a time, citing Kitayama's studies of Americans who lived in Japan and Japanese who lived in America, and eventually Nisbett concludes we're capable of going either way: East or West.

Nisbett says his speculation as to why Greece and China diverged is "a scientific theory—because it leads to predictions that can be tested" (p. 42). I would take issue with his implicit philosophy of science that being predictive makes it a scientific theory, but in any case Nisbett is not testing his theory of origins; what he does test, and what he helps to establish that makes his book an important contribution, is that there are differences in perception and cognition.

What would be of still greater interest would be the implications of these cultural differences in thought for controversies in areas ranging from criminal justice to education, and here the book just begins to scratch the surface. For example, can culture excuse one's behavior? Are there certain actions one couldn't have helped undertaking because of culture (what philosophers call the inability thesis), in which case perhaps our criminal law should permit a cultural defense? (Tunick, in press). Or another example: Should a single teaching pedagogy be applied in a multicultural classroom? In one study Nisbett mentions, subjects are asked to speak out loud as they solve various problems; when doing this, the performance of Asians decreases, but not that of European Americans (p. 211),

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suggesting Asians don't verbalize. Does this mean they should or shouldn't be encouraged to speak out in class?

I must add one concern I have about Nisbett's early chapter on Aristotle and Confucius. Here Nisbett hopes to establish the fundamental contrast between East and West. He passes off as truths deeply contested views about the ancient Greeks: that they emphasized agency and individuality, in contrast to the ancient Chinese, who are said to emphasize instead friendship, family, and community. This distinction is supposed to be the root of contemporary differences in ways of knowing: The Asian sense of attachment to a group makes them more attentive to environment, whereas the ancient Greek emphasis on individuality culminates in a Western focus on objects abstracted from their environment. But this distinction between Aristotle and Confucius is deeply problematic. Many historians, classicists, and philosophers have argued that in fact Homeric Greece lacked a concept of an ego. Hegel famously argued that the Greeks lacked subjectivity, which he believed arose for the first time with Socrates and the sophists. Douglas MacDowell's account of Athenian homicide law indicates the absence among the ancient Greeks of a strong notion of individuality, evident in the lack of a requirement of intent in some parts of their criminal law. Political theorists generally point to the Greeks, with their concept of *paideia*, as a paradigmatic model of community peopled by *citoyen*, as opposed to bourgeois individuals. The notion that the Greeks were wanting in notions of friendship and family will puzzle any reader of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the idea that the Greeks didn't value the collectivity will surprise readers of Pericles' funeral oration. These concerns with Nisbett's views on the ancient Greeks may pose a challenge merely to Nisbett's speculation about *how* differences in thought arose; or they may cast doubt on the claim that essential differences exist, although Nisbett's important book presents a strong case that there are differences at least in perception and how people categorize. What follows from these differences, and how easily they are overcome, are just two of the fascinating issues Nisbett's book invites us to explore.

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## Reference

Tunick, M. (in press). Can culture excuse crime? *Punishment and Society*.

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