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Negotiating Procedures and Underlying Ethical Convictions in the Soviet Union and the USA

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In the light of his own personal experience the author describes fundamental differences in Soviet and American processes of conflict resolution. These, as he proceeds to demonstrate, have deep cultural roots; the basic assumptions concerning morals are different in both societies. Now under Gorbachev, however, the Soviets are changing, they are becoming much more frank and open.

I became interested in the topic of this paper when I was involved in arranging conferences between Soviet and American scientists in the fields of cybernetics and systems theory. When I first began working with Soviet scientists nine years ago, I assumed that scientific conferences involving Americans and Soviets would proceed in a fashion similar to meetings I had experienced among academics from North and South America, East and West Europe and Japan. Although I expected some difficulties due to the super-power rivalry, I was shocked by the magnitude of the differences between the thinking of Americans and Soviets about topics such as the relationship of politics to science.

In order to comprehend the reasons for this disparity, I began to study Soviet history and culture. Learning about Marxist-Leninist thought helped me to understand the terms the Soviets were using and their frame of reference. But the theory that I found most useful in my interactions with Soviet scientists was that of two systems of ethical cognition formulated by a Soviet émigré mathematician and psychologist, Vladimir Lefebvre (1982).

An Example of Cultural Differences

On most matters I found that working with Soviet scientists was not greatly different from dealing with scientists from any other country. However, when an issue of political importance arose, I discovered that Soviet scientists negotiated in a way that was dramatically different from that I was accustomed to. (I should note here that the experiences I am about to describe occurred before Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985.)

When an American begins a negotiation, he will often lead off with a conciliatory statement, thereby indicating his willingness to compromise and to reach agreement. A Soviet negotiator usually begins with a confrontational statement, indicating his commitment to principle and his determination not to compromise on vital issues. As a result of these opening statements Americans tend to conclude that the Soviets are aggressive, impolite, and unwilling to negotiate seriously. The Soviets are likely to conclude that the Americans are weak, not committed to their principles, and unprepared to negotiate seriously.

Not only do Americans and Soviets have different ways of initiating a negotiation; they also have different ideas of how it should proceed. Americans begin by indicating the area in which an agreement might be possible. They expect the other side to do the same. The region of overlap then becomes the focus of attention. The rest of the negotiation