

# Teaching Ethics, Mexican Americans and Self-Determination

**Miguel Bedolla**

Faculty of Bioethics of the  
Universita Pontificia Regina Apostolorum – Rome  
Department of Family and Community Medicine  
University of Texas Health Science Center, San Antonio

## ABSTRACT

Because Anglo American ethicists have chosen to base their thinking on the Principle of Autonomy Mexican Americans, an ethnic minority in the United States, are presented in the books that they write as less than autonomous individuals. This paper pretends to be a contribution toward an international dialogue to search for the foundations of ethics in principles other than the Anglo American idea of the autonomous individual; principles that will respect the wisdom accumulated in cultures other than the Anglo American. It argues that Mexican Americans are perceived so by Anglo American ethicists because they make decisions within the context of their familial relationships. Mexican Americans do so because they have been shaped by the subtlety of Spanish and the ways of their Ancient (Native) Mexican ancestors. With Professor Padilla's call for a transformational education the paper calls for teaching a relational ethics aware of these relationships.

## INTRODUCTION

In American Medical Ethics the principle of **Respect of Autonomy** is fundamental.<sup>1</sup> It is based on the notion that persons have a self. Through the **Patient Self-Determination Act** it is the law of the land.<sup>2</sup> The Act gives a person the right to consent or refuse to any treatment that would be indicated in her situation. American ethicists tell us that persons are autonomous when their decisions and actions are intentional, based on sufficient understanding, and free from external and internal constraints. To explain this notion a textbook that was published recently uses the counter-example of Maria, who, we are told, "...comes from a culture in which family loyalty is prized very highly and paternal authority is generally respected." The authors tell us that certain decisions that

Maria makes “might be considered less than fully autonomous.”<sup>3</sup> When I read the book I understood Maria to be a Mexican American. As Maria, I am a Mexican American; unlike Maria I am a medical ethicist and a clinical ethics consultant. As it is the case with the authors of the textbook, in the place in which I conduct most of my ethics consults, a large university hospital in the Southwestern region of the United States, I find myself frequently trying to mediate between a non-Mexican American physician who wants his or her patient to make what is understood as an autonomous, self-determining decision about the care that the patient would like to receive; by autonomous and self-determining the physician understands a decision which is free from any family influence. What the authors of the book and the physicians I deal with fail to see is that persons like Maria, understand themselves without reference to a “self”, and exercise their freedom within a matrix of familial relationships. In this they are different from other Americans. This article attempts to explain why.

### **MEXICAN AMERICANS ARE *MESTIZOS***

Mexican Americans are *mestizos* who descend from the ancient peoples of North America, and the peoples of the Iberian Peninsula. When the United States took more than half of the territory of the Republic of Mexico, after the war of 1847, it “acquired” a Mexican *mestizo* population. This population has increased due to its own natural growth and to immigration from Mexico. Persons of Mexican ancestry are becoming a significant proportion of the American population. The Bureau of the Census of the American Government prefers to call them “Hispanic.” I prefer to call them Mexican American.

### **A CRITICAL INSTANCE**

One day a Mexican American medical student called me to ask an ethics question about his patient. The patient was an elderly Mexican American woman who had been brought to a university hospital where she had just been diagnosed with cancer. The woman had had a sister who died a painful death from the same disease. Before she was brought to the hospital the woman had asked her children not to tell her the diagnosis, if it was cancer. She told them that in that case all they had to do was to bring her home. My student wanted to know if the resident-physician who had the primary responsibility of the patient had an obligation to tell the woman with what disease she had been diagnosed. I told the student that since the patient had negotiated with her family that she be not told the diagnosis, if it was cancer, and that since she had also negotiated that she be brought home if that was the diagnosis, that I believed that the patient would be able to know what she had without hearing the word that she feared. Thus, I told the student that I

believed she should not be told her diagnosis. The student then added that the resident-physician wanted to tell the patient that she had cancer because he felt it was his obligation to do so in order to allow her to make an informed decision about the care that she wanted. In other words, the resident physician wanted to tell the woman her diagnosis in order to give her a chance to exercise her right to self-determination. My student also told me that when the patient's children found out what the resident physician intended to do they had insisted that if their mother were told her diagnosis she would be devastated. My student shared what I told him with the resident-physician while the children of the patient continued to insist that she not be told her diagnosis. Despite all this the resident-physician told the woman that she had been diagnosed with cancer. The woman died, extremely anguished, a few hours later.

The fundamental issue here, what the resident physician never understood, is that in the Mexican American family freedom does not reside on an autonomous, self-determining individual, but in the individual who chooses from a number of options that are known only in interaction with the family. To see the reason for this one must understand two fundamental ideas. The first idea one must understand is that humans who spoke Spanish shaped the relationships within the Mexican American family. The second idea that one must understand is that although those relationships were shaped by persons who spoke Spanish, these persons are *mestizos* have continued to be in cultural continuity with ways of the family among the Native Americans of what now is Mexico: the Ancient Mexicans.

## THE SPANISH LANGUAGE OF THE MEXICAN AMERICAN FAMILY

Spanish differs from English in many ways. It has two verbs, *ser* and *estar*, for the English verb to be. It has two verbs, *tener* and *haber*, for the English verb to have. Its verbs have many more tenses than English verbs have, allowing its speakers a much more precise grasp of being and doing in relation to time. However, for this talk the important thing is the difference between "to know" in English and "to know" in Spanish. Professor Ray Padilla from the College of Education and Human Development of the University of Texas in San Antonio has made me aware of this difference.<sup>4</sup>

In English there is the verb "to know." It means: to perceive directly, to have direct cognition of or understanding... and to be aware of the truth or factuality of, or to be convinced or certain, and to have a practical understanding. One of its archaic meanings is that of sexual intercourse.<sup>5</sup> This English verb can be translated into two Spanish verbs, *saber* and *conocer* that interestingly enough have some meanings that

overlap, but they are not entirely synonymous. Thus, where English is “compact” Spanish is “differentiated.”

*Conocer* means to have an idea or notion of a thing. *Conocer* implies the use of one’s intelligence in an interactive manner. It can be used in the same archaic meaning of the English verb to know to denote sexual intercourse. As Professor Padilla says:

*Conocer* implies a more personal and interactive kind of knowing, a situated kind of knowing that depends on personal experience. To observe someone or something is to know (in the sense of *saber*) about the person or the thing, but it is not *conocer*. To know people or places interactively involves *conocer*. *Conocer* implies a contextualization or mutuality of knowing, a knowing that is achieved in a relationship that is reciprocal between the knowing parties. Thus, *conocer* can not be absolute knowing because it is premised on a relationship between the knower and the known and the relationship can not be one of objectivity, rather it must be one of interconnectivity and interactivity.<sup>6</sup>

- *Saber* is a general, abstract understanding that, in many cases one has accepted as true, not because one has engaged one’s intelligence interactively to achieve it, but because one has concluded that the person communicating it is reliable. *Saber* can never be used to mean sexual intercourse. It is the root word of wisdom, *sabiduria* general knowledge, *el saber*, and also for flavor, *sabe amargo*. Professor Padilla illustrates the difference between these two verbs with the following example.

Suppose that you were looking for someone named Juan García in one of the neighborhoods of Juárez and you did not know where he lived. You might get to the neighborhood, meet a vendor on the street, and ask: “¿Dónde vive Juan García?” (Where does Juan García live?) The answer might come back: *¡Se de él pero no lo conozco*. Now what are we to make of this response if we translate it into English? Surely it would not be an accurate translation to say: I know him but I do not know him.<sup>7</sup>

*Conocer* as Professor Padilla says “opens an epistemological space” that is not available in English.<sup>8</sup> Knowing of the *conocer*-type “makes no claim to universality or to objectivist foundations.” It is entirely practical. Yet the *conocer*-type knowing may “validate knowledge derived through *saber*-type knowing as in the expression: *Se donde vive porque lo conozco*. (I know where he lives because I am acquainted with him.)”<sup>9</sup> Or as the children of my student’s patient could have said, “sabemos lo que mama quiere porque ella nos dijo.” (We know (interactive) what mother wants because she told us.) Thus, as Professor Padilla emphasizes, Spanish opens an epistemological space in which one can know abstractly (*saber*) as well as know relationally (*conocer*).

This differentiated epistemological space, which contrasts with the compact English epistemological space, seems to be ancient. In his Dictionary of Selected Synonyms of the Principal Indo-European Languages Carl Darling Buck observes that the two main meanings of the modern English verb to know, "...namely a) 'know as a fact' (I know it is so vs. believe) and b) 'be acquainted with' (a person or thing), were originally expressed by different words – *vid-* and *jna-* in Sanskrit - and still are in many Indo-European languages."<sup>10</sup> It must also be noted that the Sanskrit root-word *vid-*, as Pelikan explains, means "... sacred knowledge, and might in some ways be rendered more appropriately with the English word "wisdom."<sup>11</sup> The relationship between the two terms of the differentiated epistemological space, as Buck notes, is complex, but in fact it is an epistemological differentiation that English lost when it compacted the meaning of the Sanskrit words into one single symbol.

The differentiation between *conocer* and *saber* allows us to understand the way a Mexican American family interacts when any of its members need to make an important decision. It explains why Maria seems, to the authors of the ethics textbook quoted, someone who is not fully autonomous. The patient of my student and her family, as well as Maria and her family, are not searching for an abstract truth, *saber*, but for a *conocer* – an *conocimiento* – that has to do with what Eric Voegelin would call the "right order" of their own particular existence.<sup>12</sup> It is a *conocimiento* that will allow the patient, and Maria to order their lives correctly, that is, wisely. This *conocimiento* is also a truth that only can be found relationally.

## THE WAYS OF NATIVE FAMILY OF ANCIENT MEXICO

Even before the Spanish language was brought to Mexico, the natives of the country had already developed a familialistic orientation that would support the distinction between *conocer* and *saber*. The constant marking of gender differences was central to these natives. "If woman sat thus, men sat so... This decisive sorting was designed to share and to balance rather than to divide..."<sup>13</sup> This was manifested in their supreme deity. Its name, *Ometeotl*, means the "two god" and ruled over the highest heaven, *Omeyocan*, the place of duality. *Ometeotl* had the form of *Ometecuhtli*, lord-two and his wife *Omecihuatl*, lady-two. The supreme deity and all other gods were married couples.<sup>14</sup>

Humans also had to be married to be complete.<sup>15</sup> There are a number of Ancient Mexican accounts about their creation. In all of them a man and a woman are created

together and simultaneously. In one of these accounts *Ometecuhtli* and his wife *Omecihuatl*, engendered together the first man *Cipactonal* and the first woman, *Oxomoco*.<sup>16</sup> From them all men and women come. *Ometecuhtli* and *Omecihuatl* gave each his or her soul.<sup>17</sup>

Just as the two principles *Ometeotl* could not have substance independent from the other, so it was in a way with the human couple. A mother advised her daughter:

... Not as if in a market will you search for he who will be your companion... But if you disdain he whom could become your companion, the one that has been chosen by our God... Whoever is your companion, you, together, will have to end life. Do not leave him... That you be happy, that our Lord make you a happy woman.<sup>18</sup>

Elderly matchmakers frequently arranged these marriages. On the wedding day the bride was addressed as follows:

O my daughter, thou art here. For thy sake thy mothers, thy fathers have become old men, old women; already thou commencest the life of an old woman...<sup>19</sup>

She was carried at dusk to the house of the groom. Seated on a mat before the household hearth, the couple was presented with gifts. The old matchmakers tied together the couple's clothing in a knot ritually expressed their marriage.<sup>20</sup> The father advised his newly wedded son as follows:

... because you must be her mother and that you lead her along the way that she must follow, that must be followed. Instruct her.<sup>21</sup>

Later the same father tells his son:

And lead the owner of the skirt, the owner of the long shirt to do her work... and (to care for her children) if one or two collar pieces, quetzal feather, were born, came into the world from her womb, her breast, from she who wears the skirt, the long shirt.<sup>22</sup>

The bridegroom addressed his wife as follows:

My companion, listen, I hope you will take, I hope you will accept what I will tell you with much love; that you will receive it in happiness, now that the Lord is favorable... because (it) has tied us.<sup>23</sup>

The wife answered her husband saying:

Because I am your flesh, your bones I become. Is it in truth that you are hiding something from me, could you be lying to me? Because I will be whatever you keep in me, my man, my lord.<sup>24</sup>

Townsend has described the birth of their child as a special occasion. The midwife shouted

war cries to honor de mother for having fought a good battle, for having become a warrior that had "captured" a baby. The midwife who attended the delivery spoke to the baby, as if addressing an honored but tired and hungry traveler. She exhorted it to rest among his parents and grandparents, and told it of the transitory nature of life... Then

followed the child's first bath, during which the midwife spoke in a low voice to the baby about the purifying water deity *Chalchiuhtlicue*.<sup>25</sup>

The Baby would be physically pampered and enjoyed a great deal of physical fondling. The mother devoted her undivided attention to him or her. The baby's access to the breast was unregulated. As the baby grew it continued to have the most tender sentiments about their joyful intimacy with its mother who "with thee...hath nodded half-asleep, she has been soiled by [thy] excretions; and with her milk she hath given thee strength."<sup>26</sup> In the *Huehuetlahtolli*, a book in which the wisdom on ancient men and women was kept a father speaks to his son with these words:<sup>27</sup>

My son, my collar-piece, my precious feather, you have come to life, you have been born, you have come to be on earth, in the earth of our Lord. He hammered you, he gave you form, he made you be born He by whom one lives, God. We have looked after you, your mothers, your fathers, your aunts, your uncles, your relatives, all of them have looked after you, they have cried, they have suffered for you for as long as you were coming, for as long as you were being born upon the earth.<sup>28</sup>

Because Ancient Mexicans always thought of a human within the context of the family, they failed to understand the Christ that was being preached to them immediately after the Conquest because he had a father, but did not have a mother. They accepted baptism only after they understood the relationship between Christ and Mary, a Mary that was brown-skinned like them, a woman named *Coatlaxihupe* – *Guadalupe* to the Spaniards, whom they believed had appeared where they had worshiped the goddess *Tonantzin*.<sup>29</sup> Once baptized, the Ancient Mexicans now saw what other modern day American Christians hardly ever notice: the whole web of Christ's familial relationships in which Anne, Mary's mother, is Christ's grandmother! This is expressed in the following traditional Indian prayer:

Blessed Saint Anne, God's little grandma, Cover me up with your shawl, for I am a little one!<sup>30</sup>

The people that lived within these relationships distinguished clearly between the male and the female, but as the supreme god was both male and female, and one, either one of the spouses could be both the father and the mother of the children. Fathers addressed their young sons in the following manner:

...for God, is Lord, (it) is a great protector, is a shelterer, is powerful. Because He is your very mother, your father, much attention (it) pays to taking good care of you, to love you much more than I love you, I, who am your mother, your father.<sup>31</sup>

While the sons answered:

... Where will you in truth send me? Because you are my mother, my father, because I am your blood, your color, because it is still to be revealed, to be manifested what you have said, what has been expressed by you who are my mother, my father...<sup>32</sup>

## **THE “SELF” OF A MEXICAN AMERICAN IS HIS OR HER FAMILY**

In his article “The Eclipse of Reality” Eric Voegelin says, in an obvious reference to the work of Sartre, that “By an act of imagination man can shrink himself to a self that is “condemned to be free”... The contraction of his humanity to a self imprisoned in its selfhood is the characteristic of so-called modern man. It becomes recognizable as a personal and social process in the eighteenth century, when man begins to refer to himself, not as Man, but as Self, an Ego, an I, and Individual, a Transcendental Subject...”<sup>33</sup> A subject, I add, who has the right to be autonomous and self-determining.

The origins of the idea of autonomy and self-determination seem to be in the medieval institution of lay brethren who were free from feudal bonds and who, through the Cistercian experience, gained an autonomous moral and spiritual personality. To this was added Joachim de Fiore’s idea of a Third Realm in which the Church is no longer necessary because the gifts for the perfect life reach men and women without the mediation of the sacraments and clergy. This idea was fundamental to the emergence of Protestantism. When the idea was secularized it gave rise to the individualism that seeks to liberate men and women from the authority of social structures of an “older age.” In this context the human wealth of the family is lost in the egalitarianism of a community of autonomous, self-determining, individuals each of whom lives a life of his or her own and are afraid to say anything about the lives of other.<sup>34</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

To non-Hispanic Whites Mexican Americans, like Maria, always seem to be less than fully autonomous. I have argued that in fact it Mexican Americans appear to be so only because they exercise their freedom within the context of a family whose relationships were shaped by the Spanish language and by the way the family worked among the Ancient Mexicans. Before I finish, however, I want to go back to the idea of Mexican Americans as *Mestizo*. As a matter of fact Modern Mexicans are not simply *mestizo* of Spanish and Native American, they also have ancestors in Africa. If you will permit me, I will ask you to imagine a Mexican American family, represented as families are in genetic studies, all the way up to the great grand-parents. What will be found is that, in the aggregate, at least one of the great-grandparents would be an African man or woman. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran in his book on the Black population of Mexico says that the population of Mexico “... was integrated from the mixture, in varying degrees, of



the three big races that came together in our country: the Indigenous, the White and the Black.”<sup>35</sup>

I have not yet had the time to begin identifying those features of the culture of Mexican Americans that are rooted in Africa. But I can say this much: because of the contribution of each of the groups that make up their mestizo ancestry, Mexican Americans do not consider themselves as self-determining individuals each of whom lives a life of his or her own. Mexican Americans realize that they have the freedom to make choices. But they do not need to feel that they are autonomous in order to be free. They are free in interaction with and within the context of their family, a family that plays for Mexican men and women the role that for others is played by their imagined self.

I also want to go back to the ideas of Professor Padilla. He is using them to create what he calls a transformational education...

... that seeks to promote individual and collective transformation through engagement in dialogue to promote conocer-type knowing, through technological development that is driven by saber-type knowing, and through the discovery and use of new possibilities that result from the confluence of cultures in border regions.<sup>36</sup>

Following Padilla it could be said that students of ethics ought to be taught not only the ethics that emerges from the ideas of the self and self-determination, but also a Transformational, rather a Relational Medical Ethics in which the person, especially if he is Mexican American, is always conceived and respected within the context of his or her family relationships. This would serve as the foundation for a Medical Ethics, to be taught to all students in which the patient is respected along with the family of the patient, an ethics that respects and supports the family relationships within which Mexican Americans live their lives and define themselves. If the Medicine resident that felt obliged to tell his patient the diagnosis that had been taught this ethics in medical school, my student's patient would not have died such anguished death and her family would have enjoyed her presence longer.

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