



Old questions for the new anthropology of morality: A commentary

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Anthropological Theory
2014, Vol. 14(3) 356–370
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DOI: 10.1177/1463499614534555
ant.sagepub.com



Abstract

The return of anthropological interest to the descriptive study of the moral foundations of social life is a very welcome development. Nevertheless, if there is going to be a new anthropology of morality, it must have something new to say about some very old questions. The first is the analytic question: what counts as a morality? The second and third are descriptive questions: is some idea of an objective moral charter a feature of human social life and individual judgment; and what is the scope, generality and detail with which various aspects or domains of the social order (from gender relations to food customs) are understood and experienced as extensions of a moral order from the 'native point of view'? Finally, why do the many peoples of the world apparently disagree with each other so much in both their spontaneous-habitual-unreflective-internalized-'embodied' (and hence implicit) judgments and in their reflective-reasoned-thoughtful-spelled out (and hence explicit) judgments about the rightness or wrongness of specific actions? Those are questions that no anthropology of morality, old or new, can or should avoid.

Keywords

Comparative ethics, moral anthropology, moral development, moral psychology, morality, relativism, universalism

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The return of anthropological interest to the descriptive study of the moral foundations of social life is a very welcome development. Nevertheless, as so many of the essays in this collection make clear, if there is going to be a new anthropology of morality, it must have something new to say about some very old questions. Four of those questions loom large for the theorists and ethnographers whose essays are included in this issue. The first is the analytic question: what counts as a morality? The second and third are descriptive questions: is some idea of an objective moral charter a feature of human social life and individual judgment wherever anthropologists have in fact systematically investigated the question? This is an issue that leads naturally to the closely related descriptive question: what is the scope, generality and detail with which various aspects or domains of the social order (from gender relations to food customs, from authority relations to bodily attire) are understood and experienced as extensions of a moral order from the 'native point of view'? Finally, the fourth and interpretive question (which, as we shall see, is ultimately, and unavoidably, also a normative question): why do the many peoples of the world apparently disagree with each other so much in both their spontaneous-habitual-unreflective-internalized-'embodied' (and hence implicit) judgments and in their reflective-reasoned-thoughtful-spelled out (and hence explicit) judgments about the rightness or wrongness of specific actions? Or, alternatively phrased: why don't those judgments about what is right and what is good, if they satisfy the conditions of identity for counting as *moral* judgments, possess the universality that is characteristic of the idea of truth? Those are questions that no anthropology of morality, old or new, can or should avoid. Happily they are on center stage in this collection of essays.

Several of the essays are in dialogue with various thoughtful and provocative programmatic statements calling for a 'new anthropology of morality' or seeking to identify a subdiscipline called *moral anthropology*, which would be analogous to political anthropology or economic anthropology (see, for example, Fassin, 2008; Laidlaw, 2002; Robbins, 2007; Zigon, 2007). The collection begins with an analytic definitional essay written by the anthropologist Leslie Beldo. Beldo seeks to identify the domain of the moral which serves as the object matter of a moral anthropology, and he discusses the character of this 'special kind of ought'. Beldo's account of the universal folk concept of a moral obligation conveyed by the English lexical item *ought* reminded us of the explication of *ought* offered by Henry Sidgwick in his classic volume (and model of analytic precision in the study of common-sense morality) *The Methods of Ethics* (1884: 27–35) – namely, that the moral sense of *ought* implies that the approved-of conduct is objectively 'right' in the sense that it 'cannot, without error, be disapproved of by any other mind'.

Beldo goes on to critique and reject the views advanced by at least one advocate of the new moral anthropology who argues that analytic coherency is a questionable virtue in anthropological studies of morality and that it is intellectually acceptable in the study of folk moral judgments to claim that the domain of the moral does not necessarily involve a sense of command, suprapersonal authority, duty or

obligation. Beldo also suggests that the domain of the moral is not limited to the ethics of autonomy or liberationist views of freedom from cultural constraint. His view is consistent with a line of comparative research on the moral foundations of customary practices known as 'the big three of morality', which has documented several clusters of values in folk psychology, including values associated with autonomy (freedom of choice, freedom from harm, equality), community (duty, hierarchy, interdependency, loyalty, sacrifice) and divinity (purity, sanctity, cleanliness, sacred order). These values of folk moral psychology are held to be ultimate and self-justifying and to represent the various 'goods' that it is objectively right for individuals and societies to promote (see, for example, Haidt, 2012; Haidt and Graham 2007; Hickman, 2011; Jensen, 2008; Menon, 2003, 2013; Menon and Shweder, 2008; Miller, 1994, 1997; Shweder et al., 1987, 2003).

The collection of essays in this special issue of *Anthropological Theory* ends with a discussion by the moral philosopher David Wong, himself a world-renowned moral pluralist. Wong explains why anthropological findings of diversity in social norms across cultural groups do not necessarily imply the existence of genuine *moral* diversity. After discussing the relevance of social science evidence for the evaluation of virtue ethics, he develops a very special kind of functionalist perspective on morality that leads him to conclude that there are 'better and worse moralities, and definitely some false ones, but no single true morality'. Judge Richard Posner (1998: 1641), the University of Chicago legal scholar, once described his own form of relativism as 'an adaptationist conception of morality, in which morality is judged – nonmorally, in the way that a hammer might be judged well or poorly adapted to its goal of hammering nails into wood or plaster – by its contribution to the survival, or other ultimate goals, of a society or some group within it'. David Wong's moral pluralism appears to advance an adaptationist conception of that sort.

Betwixt and between Beldo's and Wong's essays, Julia Cassaniti examines the process of moral evaluation and motivation (desiring what is objectively desirable and hence ought to be desired) at work in emotional self-regulation in a Buddhist community in Northern Thailand. Cassaniti explicates the moral values locally associated with what she identifies as the process of minimizing 'emphatic or strong emotions'. Toward the end of her essay, she speaks of the moral emotions in such a way that one is led to wonder whether that phrase (*moral emotions*) is meant to imply that there are particular and different kinds of emotions or feelings that motivate moral behavior (actually getting one to do what is right in the moral sense of *ought*) in different cultural communities, or alternatively whether she is advocating a 'noncognitive' approach to the study of morality, which holds that ultimately the proper subject matter of the anthropology of morality is nothing other than the study of the emotions – in other words, that conscience is an emotion.

Nancy Eberhardt then reminds contemporary moral anthropologists of some not-so-ancient social science history. She has in mind anthropologists currently drawn to such notions as human agency as resistance to culture who define

morality in terms of the liberal ideals of autonomy (self-governance) and equality. Such conceptions of personhood and morality, she reminds us, have been advocated before. (She discusses, in particular, the classic 1932 response of Jean Piaget to the 1925 moral education writings of Emile Durkheim.) Eberhardt draws on her moral development research in Thailand to critique both Durkheim and Piaget. She suggests specific ways in which reason and objectivity are not necessarily hostile to tradition and argues that moral discourse can be ‘both culturally-mediated and autonomous’ at the same time.

Jacob Hickman, working with Hmong refugee communities, then examines the relationship between moral values and the idea of respect for persons, which he analyses with special attention to a Hmong conception (and related rituals) of ‘ancestral personhood’. Roger Scruton, the contemporary political philosopher writing very much in the respect-for-inherited-tradition spirit of Edmund Burke, has noted:

Since the Enlightenment, it has been normal for Europeans to think of society as a contract. The novelty of the idea is two-fold: first, it implies that social membership is a free choice. Second, it suggests that all members of society are currently living. Neither of these thoughts is true.

Scruton goes on to say:

Care for the dead and care for the unborn go hand in hand. (1998: 9–10)

He strongly suggests that those who are alive act as though they are part of an historical ethical community (even though in the secular modern world they lack a language for expressing their communal commitments) and avoid ‘pillage’ and ‘sacrilege’ by allowing the dead and the unborn to have a vote on how one lives one’s life today. In effect, Jacob Hickman’s essay uses the illustration of the Hmong practice of ancestral personhood and ancestor worship to clarify the worldview and moral authority associated with the sense of feeling bound to the past and to a particular in-group, historical ethical community or deep tradition.

The full history of the anthropology of morality as a descriptive (and normative) undertaking has yet to be written. It’s a substantial history even if new academic bottles with subdisciplinary labels such as *moral anthropology* or *the new anthropology of morality* are currently being minted. Just have a look, for example, at the work of Sumner (2002 [1906]), Durkheim (1925), Malinowski (1926), Westermarck (1932), Benedict (1934), Kroeber (1952), Read (1955), Herskovits (1960), Kluckhohn and Strodbeck (1961), Dumont (1966), Geertz (1973, 1977), LeVine (1984), Fortes (1987), Whiting (1993) and many others (see Shweder, 1982, for a brief review; also Menon, 2000; Menon and Shweder, 1998; Shweder et al., 1990, 2003). As a descriptive undertaking that disciplinary history overlaps with the history of the western European and North American discovery of astonishing and challenging cultural variations in human judgments about value, values and

local notions about an objective moral charter for an ideal way of life. A century or more of fieldwork by anthropologists has documented that concrete normative judgments about actions and customs do not seem to spontaneously converge across autonomous cultural groups or over historical time.¹ Actions and cultural practices that are sources of moral approbation or approval in one community are frequently sources of moral opprobrium or disapproval in another, and disagreements about what is good or bad, right or wrong, virtuous or vicious, moral or immoral, of value and not of value can persist over generations, if not centuries.

A particularly striking example is the current 'western' or 'first world' moral alarm over the practice of female genital surgeries for children and youths in Africa. As anthropologists and historians who study this topic are well aware, the moral panic over this type of body modification is nothing new (see, for example, Ahmadu, 2000; Boddy, 2007; Kennedy, 2009; Kenyatta, 1962; Shweder, 2003; Thomas, 2003). Indeed, it is very much a replay of the moral indignation expressed in the 1920s by Christian missionaries and British colonial administrators as they embraced what they took to be their moral obligation to uplift the peoples of the 'dark continent' from error, ignorance, barbarism and confusion. If a moral breakdown is a state of mind or an existential condition in which one has been induced to actually reflect upon or apply one's reason and intelligence in the self-conscious critical reevaluation of one's own intuitive, spontaneous, internalized, previously fluent, habitual or embodied responses of approval or disapproval, it appears there was no general sense of moral breakdown on either side of this particular colonial encounter with normative difference. Then, as now, majority populations in numerous East and West African ethnic groups held the practice in high regard. Then, as now, they resented the implication that they were child abusers, victims or slaves of a savage tradition for engaging in what they thought of, and in many ethnic groups today still do think of, as an honorable and morally motivated custom. Then, as now, there were plenty of ethnic groups in Africa who did not embrace the practice and many other ethnic groups who did. Then, as now, what members of some ethnic groups (for example in Europe and North America) judge to be a torturous, harmful and mutilating violation of bodily integrity, the members of other ethnic groups (for example, those in East and West Africa) judge to be a beautification or purification or welcome improvement of the human body in its unadorned and (in their view) morally untutored and immature state. Indeed, the history of the anthropology of morality as a descriptive undertaking is in some significant measure the documentation of astonishing subject-relativity in social norms and in the local appraisal of actions as good or bad, virtuous or vicious, normal or abnormal, natural or unnatural.

That type of encounter with the subject-relativity of social norms has been called 'the open predicament' in anthropological literature inspired by Robin Horton (1967) on the social conditions that promote the development of self-conscious rational thought. The encounter with subject-relativity in normative appraisals has also been linked in a vast moral development literature spawned by the work of Jean Piaget (1932) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) to an individual process

of rational self-criticism and mental reconstruction called 'de-centering' or 'taking the perspective of the other', which these developmental psychologists argue should promote a recognition of the distinction between one's received cultural tradition (based on external authority) and the objective moral order. Among religious and secular missionary groups and feminist and human rights NGOs engaged in a global 'civilizing project', the encounter has tended to reinforce judgments of moral superiority rather than prepare the way for self-examination or a progressive new stage of self-consciousness and critical thought.

Notably, for many cultural anthropologists the accumulated descriptive evidence of group-relative or subject-relative judgments about the goodness or badness, or rightness or wrongness, of particular social norms has had a different kind of effect. For whatever reason (justified or not), to many anthropologists it 'has seemed like a massive argument against absolutism or objectivism in morals', as Clifford Geertz (2000: 44) remarked in his famous essay 'Anti Anti-Relativism'. Geertz suggested that research in cultural anthropology has tended to carry with it the message 'that, as they see things differently and do them otherwise in Alaska or the D'Entrecasteaux, our confidence in our own seeings and doings and our resolve to bring others around to sharing them are rather poorly based'. Here Geertz himself seems to imply that the typical anthropological response to the existence of subject-relativity in normative judgments across cultural groups is one of 'moral breakdown', which then prepares the way for doubting the validity of one's own judgments and for the normative embrace of anti-missionary and anti-imperial moral conclusions.

Nevertheless, however one judges the reasonableness of that anthropological response to the descriptive fact of subject-relativity in normative judgments around the world, we would like to suggest that one mark of the old anthropology of morality was its assumption that one could give a coherent answer to the interpretive question: why don't the many peoples of the world converge in their concrete judgments about the rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness of particular social norms? (question 4 above) and that one could do so (a) without suggesting that objective reality is devoid of moral truths, (b) without suggesting that those who disagree with our own judgments of right and wrong are either morally underdeveloped or barbarians who fail to understand the requirements of the one true morality or should be viewed as savage others who willfully seek to promote vice over virtue, and (c) without assuming in advance that one's own way of life is the only possible flowering of the ideals of an objective moral charter. Meeting that challenge is no small feat (as David Wong's essay in this issue makes quite clear), but at the very least it was the attempt to meet that challenge that, in part, defined the old anthropology of morality. How does the new anthropology of morality position itself with respect to that challenge? What are its answers to the problems posed by the very existence of descriptive relativity in social norms? Those questions still need to be addressed head-on, even if it turns out there is no interpretive consensus among contemporary moral anthropologists.

Fortunately with respect to question 1 above (the analytic question: what counts as a morality?) a sufficient amount of the descriptive work in the history of the anthropology of morality has uncovered a folk conception associated with a certain class of native judgments of approval and disapproval, which can be used to define the domain of moral judgment and can be formulated as follows: A moral judgment is the expressed or, more typically, implied judgment that person P *ought to* do X under such and such circumstances, where the doing of X under those circumstances is thought to be the right thing to do because it is presumed to be productive of some objective good. The basic folk assumption, which provides a grounding for an anthropology of morality, is that there is an objective moral charter defining what is good and that behavior that is moral behavior per se is right, binding and ought to be done because it is in the service of those objective goods.

Whatever cross-cultural variations may exist in conceptions of morality (for example, as discussed in detail in this collection of essays), much of the descriptive work in the old anthropology of morality documents that something very much like that minimal idea of what counts as a morality appears to be a basic feature of social life and human judgment on a global scale. What are not basic (and hence can understandably vary across persons and peoples) are the particular goods privileged in this or that cultural tradition, the substance of the cultural beliefs about the nature and source of the objectively binding moral charter which the 'native point of view' presumes to exist, the particular worldview or set of beliefs that lend credence to any particular tradition of goods or values, and the scope and specificity of the 'P ought to do X under such and such circumstances' commands and prescriptions contained in the postulated objective moral charter.

Notably, in some cultural traditions the scope of the moral charter is narrow – restricted, for example, to a list of 'natural rights' defining the limits of governmental or social regulations – and the details are left open. That is one way to make ideological space for what are then taken to be arbitrary or subject-relative 'social conventions' devoid of moral authority and the 'free to choose' and personal preference traditions of a liberal society (see Turiel, 1978, 2008, for a liberal conception of the objective moral charter in that sense). While in other cultural traditions (call them 'conservative' or 'fundamentalist' if you like) the scope of the objective moral charter is so all encompassing (and its details so well worked out in advance) that a latter-day Durkheim might well be justified in arguing that the entire social order and its customary practices and rules of propriety (what to wear, what to eat, whom to marry, how to bury the dead) are ideally thought to be coincidental with a sacred and often illiberal objective moral order, at least from the native point of view. The anthropologist of morality Raymond Firth has written about the moral understandings of the people of Tikopia in a way that reveals a very widely distributed feature (indeed arguably one of the universal features) of the native point of view on morality. Namely, 'the spirits, just as men, respond to a norm of conduct of an external character. The moral law exists in the absolute, independent of the Gods' (2004 [1936]: 335). Cultural anthropologists (such as

Durkheim) may not share this view (at least not in their capacity as theorists of morality, where they tend to view the idea of a sacred moral order as false consciousness and as a delusional projection or reification originating in the arbitrary conventions of the social order), but as most of the essays in this collection confirm, the peoples studied by anthropologists, old and new, typically have a different view of what is really real, and it includes the reality of an objective moral charter, however broad its reach and however the details of its content are locally construed.

Indeed, it is not so far-fetched to suggest that the entire so-called cognitive approach to the study of morality turns on the assumption of a single objective moral charter (the idea that moral truth is one, not many, and the same truth for all similarly situated individuals) and the closely related idea that in the face of a 'moral breakdown', moral disputes (within oneself or with other interlocutors) are disagreements of a very special kind.² They are disagreements about whether a particular act or custom or positive law is *truly and objectively* right or wrong, because, as Sidgwick noted, and as the Tikopia and most other peoples agree, if some particular act or custom is morally right (something one ought to do in the moral sense) then it 'cannot, without error, be disapproved of by any other mind' (1884: 27–35). On this account, genuine moral disputes are disagreements where either the one party (who calls the course of action right) or the other party (who calls the course of action wrong) has made a correctable error in judgment, caused perhaps by rushing to judgment before gathering relevant facts, or by failing to reason consistently, or by being confused about the meaning of concepts or words, or by allowing considerations of narrow self-interest or the spontaneous pressure of one or more emotions (love, sympathy, partisan feelings of identification or attachment, anger, disgust, fear) to inappropriately taint or bias one's judgment about the rightness (or wrongness) of the act or custom or law.

It is important to note that the objectivism posited by the cognitive approach to the study of morality is an ontological claim, not an epistemological one, and follows from the 'native point of view' on morality, as noted earlier (see the quotation from Raymond Firth). The objectivism is a feature of any posited moral reality whose truths about what is right and wrong, good or bad, virtuous or vicious remain true, definitive, and binding, not relative to this or that but rather regardless of this or that: regardless of whether human beings are aware of the requirements of the one true morality; regardless of whether human beings, once aware of those requirements, are willing to embrace them as the charter for their own behavior; and regardless, too, of the mental process by which valid knowledge of the moral charter might become available to human minds: for example, as a revealed truth/a gift from the gods, as an innate intuition, as a self-evident truth, or even as the deliberative conclusion of some chain of inductive or deductive secular reasoning.

In other words, the cognitive approach to the study of morality is based on the notion that genuine moral disputes are about something that is both normative (ought-like, 'in a special kind of way', as Beldo avers) and objective (impersonal, impartial) – 'natural' or 'inalienable' rights, for example (on the assumption that

such rights are discoverable and truly exist as objective things). Thus, at least in principle, genuine moral disputes have some chance of being resolved on the basis of evidence and through the intelligent use of critical reason aimed at eliminating error, ignorance and confusion from the whole process of judging whether a course of action is right or wrong (good or bad, moral or immoral). That is what the cognitive study of morality is about – the intelligent evaluation of one’s own spontaneous or affect-laden judgments of approval or disapproval under conditions in which one’s spontaneous evaluations and reactions are called into question.

How cognitive in orientation is the new anthropology of morality? Or alternatively posed, to what extent is the new anthropology of morality a rejection of cognitivism in favor of some variety of subjectivism, emotivism or non-cognitivism in which it is argued that the human experience of value is nothing more than the projection or reification of personal or collective feelings? According to moral subjectivists or emotivists, old and new, moral disagreements, whether in public policy forums or courtrooms or everyday life or even in moral philosophy, are best pictured as nothing other than a competitive struggle for power, influence and the reproductive success of one’s own subjective or conventional perspective, a Darwinian-like ideological struggle in which each disagreeable side seeks to assert its personal preferences or group enactments and traditions and expand its community of cooperative and predictable like-minded adherents.

As a new anthropology of morality tries to define and position itself, it will not be able to avoid addressing and answering such questions: for example, whether normative ethics should be reduced to descriptive ethics (the ‘science of morality’) or whether one should stop trying to decide who has got it objectively right when one person calls this or that act or custom right (good, virtuous, moral) and another calls it wrong (bad, vicious, immoral). The response of the moral subjectivist throughout the long history of moral studies has always been that apparent moral disputes about whether this or that act or custom is truly or objectively right (or wrong) should be theorized as sham or sophisticated intellectual performances (discourses, ideologies, rhetoric) serving a personal, social or political function yet devoid of actual truth value.

That response is meant to suggest that (a) the aim of any genuine social science of morality is to investigate moral disagreements between persons and groups exclusively to document their pragmatic impact on the human struggle for power, influence and social reproduction; and (b) to the extent moral anthropology is a genuine social science rather than a moral ideology struggling for its own power and influence, it should be value-neutral and avoid moralizing and taking sides when moral disagreements (that is to say, power struggles) arise. Ultimately moral subjectivism leads to the view that, given the nature of moral disagreements, there can be no speaking truth to power because there is no objective moral truth. Not surprisingly, if a moral judgment is little more than an expressive exclamation of value or some collectivity’s constitutive definition of what is right and wrong, the voice of the mighty is likely to be loud, and ultimate. So portrayed, the doctrine of moral subjectivism leads to the conclusions that within and across social groups

'might defines right' and that, at its core, the social order is a power order; or, at the very least, there is no meaningful distinction to be drawn between morality and power. According to that view, the moral domain has no objective foundation. There is no distinction to be drawn between what an individual (or group) desires and what is morally desirable. There are no universally authoritative standards for assessing the moral worthiness of the preferences of a person or a people. Morality becomes (as Ruth Benedict averred) a convenient term for socially learned habits. And, thus, since there are no impersonal grounds for the critical moral evaluation of others (and, it would seem to logically follow, of even oneself), when moral disagreements occur, there is nothing much for human reason to grab onto and rather little that needs to be said, aside from personal or group-based declarations of likes and tastes.

Moral subjectivism or emotivism thus counters the cognitive study of morality by picturing the cognitive project as based on a metaphysical error – namely, the postulation of an overarching or transcendental realm of moral truths that exists independent of our involvement with it. It debunks morality as a reified expression of individual (egocentric) or group (ethnocentric) subjectivity posturing as objective truth. It embraces a particular normatively loaded metaphysical stance of its own (subjectivism or conventionalism) according to which moral properties (such as the 'right' and the 'good') do not exist independent of a person or people declaring that something is right and good. In effect, it fundamentally disables the entire project of objective or third-person moral judgment. It short-circuits the process of moral critique and moral justification by denying the decentered, impersonal or human mind-independent existence of any moral reality. Thus, it reduces moral anthropology to the descriptive or positive study (rather than the normative or critical study) of the way members of particular groups try to influence or manipulate others (including children), to get them to embody or internalize, or at least adhere to, the collective acceptances of their local society. That reduction of normative-critical studies (aimed at employing human intelligence to discover the objectively right or good thing to do) to descriptive-positive studies of the process of social control and collective acceptance is wryly summarized by Frederick Nietzsche (1982) in one of his famous aphorisms, in which he states, 'Being moral means being highly susceptible to fear'. One wonders whether that is what the Foucaultians in moral anthropology really have in mind. Does their subjectivism merely express their own personal preference for egalitarian or liberationist values while leaving them philosophically and metaphysically unable to provide objective grounds for others to embrace or even tolerate those values?

That subjectivist (some might say 'nihilistic') view of the moral domain – that when it comes to saying what is right or wrong (good or bad, virtuous or vicious), there is nothing more to the story than the acceptances of individuals and groups – has had a remarkably robust life. That subjectivist view tends to underwrite a series of straight-faced cognate and overlapping definitions of morality which are all quite remote from the folk concept that defines the domain of morality studied by the cognitivists in moral anthropology. Variations on this subjectivist definition

of the moral domain include all of the following: (a) the functionalist end-of-the-story definition of morality (including Darwinian variants) – that whatever contributes to a society's survival over time will be thought to be right (or good) by members of that society and (given that there is no objective morality) that is the end of the story, (b) the public opinion makes virtue end-of-the-story definition of morality – that any practice is right (or good) to the extent it is the done thing and (given that there is no objective morality) that is the end of the story (assuming that those who embrace the practice shout with the largest crowd or have the local power or authority to create and maintain a social consensus among in-group members that the practice is right (or good)), (c) the radical multicultural end-of-the-story definition of morality – that every token of group diversity in the world is right (or good) and that is the end of the story, (d) the incommensurable world's end-of-the-story definition of morality – that the standards for identifying a particular judgment as right (or good) are *entirely* local with regard to time, place and culture, and hence, across localities, there is nothing more to be said, and (e) the hypertolerant, solipsistic, to-each-his-own-bag, end-of-the-story definition of morality – that if any mode of conduct (say, for example, wearing a burqa in public spaces) is judged right (or good) by peoples living on one side of the Mediterranean (or for that matter on one side of Paris) and wrong (or bad) by peoples living on the other side of the Mediterranean (or the other side of Paris) the judgments of those peoples are morally equivalent precisely because they each have their own subjective morality or opinions about what is right or wrong (good or bad, virtuous or vicious) – end of story.

Because those definitions of morality are widespread (and obviously ripe for debate), the query 'Are you now or have you ever been a relativist?' has become an accusation directed at American cultural anthropology. In the popular imagination (and even in some academic circles) the profession is often thought to be soft on the wrongdoings of others and is stereotypically (although not necessarily accurately) associated with extreme versions of subjectivism. It remains to be seen how the new anthropology of morality will respond to the finger pointing.

Notes

1. As David Wong notes in his essay, those concrete normative judgments are not necessarily uniform within cultural groups either. Although, as Wong points out, that internal variation and the presence of oppositional voices of various kinds within any particular society takes on significance by reference to the particular orthodoxy made manifest in local customs and practices. And these customs and practices, one might add, are themselves often expressive of some group typifying, dominant, or mainstream ideas about what is true, good, beautiful and efficient. The general question of how factions, sections, interest groups or 'wings' play a part in the organization of a viable society is a classic issue in the social sciences dating from at least the brilliant treatment of the topic by James Madison in the Federalist Papers (Federalist 10). See, for example, Jensen (1997, 1998, 2008) and Haidt and Graham (2007).

2. Given the frequency with which the aims and principles of the cognitive approach to the study of morality are caricatured as post hoc rationalization and are poorly understood, we should perhaps note that the existence of spontaneous/habitual/automated/internalized/intuitive/personally affecting concrete judgments of approval or disapproval is the starting point for a cognitive analysis of moral reactions and that most cognitivists are fully aware of the role of feelings and emotions in motivating moral actions. The key question for the cognitive study of morality is what statements of fact are revealed by those spontaneous judgments of approval or disapproval, with respect to which imagined moral truths, if any, are those intuitive judgments justified, when and if they are called into question, and to which actions should an objective moral intelligence ascribe value, if any?

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