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The Fate(s) of Moral Absolutes in History: Pluralistic versus Developmental Visions of How to Understand Cross-Cultural Differences in Moral Judgment

Richard A. Shweder

Department of Comparative Human Development

University of Chicago

“Promoting cross-cultural understanding and communication” is the theme of this year’s conference on cultural psychology. For an anthropologist and cultural psychologist such as myself who seeks to understand heritage traditions unlike my own a call to promote cross-cultural understanding and communication raises a fundamental problem that is inherent in the very idea of “difference.”

The discipline of cultural psychology is the study of the distinct mentalities of different peoples of the world with special attention to how they think and what they know, want, feel, and value by virtue of their membership in a particular heritage tradition. If you accept that definition then the following fundamental question inevitably arises: Are the distinct cultural mentalities studied by cultural psychologists different but equal (let’s call this the ‘Pluralist’ interpretation of difference), or are they different but unequal, and hence scalable from worse to better or from inferior to superior (let’s call this the “Developmental” interpretation of difference)?

In this talk I am going to limit my brief discussion of the two modes of interpretation - pluralistic and developmental - to cultural studies of moral psychology. Moral psychology is the study of what members of different heritage traditions think and mean when they express their approval of a behavior and judge it to be right and good (or when they express their disapproval of a behavior and judge it to be wrong and bad, or even very bad, like wicked, sinful or evil).

That contrast I just drew between pluralistic and developmental interpretations of differences in the mentalities and ways of life of different groups, has a long history. Looking back two hundred years, the moral philosopher Isaiah Berlin found the contrast in Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment debates in France and Germany in the late 18th century. He notes that for many progressive European Enlightenment authors “there is only one universal civilization, of which now one nation, now another, represents the richest flowering.” According to that developmental interpretation of civilizational or national differences there is one ideal end point definitive of progressive cultural development, and it can and should be used to rank order the degree of development or underdevelopment of different mentalities and ways of life.

Isaiah Berlin went on to describe a contrastive pluralistic interpretation of cultural or civilizational differences. He associated interpretive pluralism with the 18th century German counter-Enlightenment philosopher Johann Herder. Herder interpreted cultural differences this way (quoting Berlin): “...there is a plurality of incommensurable cultures. To belong to a given community, to be connected with its members by indissoluble and impalpable ties of a common language, historical memory, habit, tradition and feeling, is a basic human need no less natural than that for food or drink or security or procreation. One nation can understand and sympathize with the institutions of another only because it knows how much its own mean to itself.”

I would like to suggest that Johann Herder, the pluralist, should be viewed as one of the founding figures of contemporary cultural psychology. Yet I do wonder: At heart, when cultural psychologists speak of group differences between holistic versus analytic thinking or between individualism versus collectivism or between the self as independent versus the self as interdependent, are those differences being interpreted in a pluralistic spirit (different but equal) or in a developmental spirit (with one side of each contrast viewed as superior or more desirable than the other)? And what does the acronym “WEIRD,” which cleverly trades on its semantic meanings in English as strange, unusual, odd, creepy or extraordinary, actually imply? Towards what mode of interpretation of difference do those several invited meanings incline? Is the relationship between the distinctive

modes of thought of Western educated college students and the distinctive modes of thought of subjects who are not “WEIRD” (for example, the devout Hindus I work with in India) one of plural equality? Or is it one of developmental superiority? And which is more desirable or advanced, the “WEIRD” or the non-WEIRD way thinking and being?

Fast forward from the late 18th century to the time I entered graduate school at Harvard University in 1966. Both modes of interpretation – the developmental and the pluralistic - were very much in play in the social sciences, as they continue to be today. Notably, by 1966 the developmental ranking of cultural mentalities and ways of life from inferior to superior had gone out of fashion in my own discipline. Over the course of the 20th century it had become more or less unacceptably invidious in American cultural anthropology to use developmental expressions such as “primitive”, “savage”, “barbaric”, “heathen,” “oppressive,” “dark age”, “feudal”, “premodern”, “superstitious”, “religious”, “pre-logical”, “backward” or even just “underdeveloped” or “maladaptive” as a way of understanding and classifying “others.” For the most part anthropologists had become pluralists and were quite willing to endure the accusation that they had gone “soft on superstition.”

At the same time the developmental interpretation of differences was alive and well (indeed it was the default position) in developmental economics and mainstream developmental psychology. In developmental psychology the writings of Jean Piaget on the stages of general intellectual development, Lawrence Kohlberg on the levels and stages of moral judgment (which he applied to individuals and groups) and to some extent Leonard Hobhouse’s book “Morals in Evolution” were quite influential. Their theories were among the most well thought out 20th century attempts at a developmental interpretation of differences in moral mentalities.

All three authors – Piaget, Kohlberg and Hobhouse - were liberal progressive descendants of the European Enlightenment who believed that the mental life of members of different heritage communities could be ranked on a universal developmental scale.

Developmental interpretations of the sort they favored get made all the time both within and across societies. Both (fast) visceral and (slower) reflective judgments get made about such things as whether monogamy is superior to polygamy, democratic governance superior to kingship or theocracy, or whether animism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and contemporary secular atheism can be lined up on some temporal developmental scale reflecting the supersession of superior forms of understanding and revealing historical progress in human mentalities and ways of life.

All three theorists were liberal enlightenment thinkers who viewed tribalism or in-group favoritism and deference to hierarchy (so-called heteronomy) as lower forms of moral understanding. In-group favoritism they judged to be incompatible with the principle of justice as equality. Hierarchy they judged to be incompatible with respect for the autonomy of all individuals. All three argued that the social and moral consciousness of human beings had not only progressively developed over the course of cultural history but should be encouraged to continue to evolve in (what they viewed as) the progressive liberal direction, liberating the individual from the constraints of inherited tradition and the burdens of ancestry.

All three argued that in the earlier or less advanced stages there was blind or unreflective adherence to the collective acceptances of one's tribe and subordination of one's capacity for rational self-determination to the will of dead ancestors and the dictates of authority figures. In the higher or more advanced stages moral thinking aimed to give every autonomous person their rightful due with reference to impartial and objective standards of freedom, justice and equality. In other words, the shift from collectivism to individualism was seen as moral progress.

What do I mean by a moral judgment as opposed to other types of judgments? I mean a judgment applied to an issue having existential significance that can be expressed in the following form: In situation S person P ought to behave in such and such a way because it is the right thing to do, and it is the right thing to do because that behavior by that person in that situation promotes some absolute

good (for example, loyalty or fairness) and makes manifest one of the rules of moral reason (for example, that one should protect the vulnerable who are in one's charge). I will provide a concrete example in a moment.

But first, let me unpack that definition of a moral judgment. I invite you to think of the cultural psychology of morality as the study of the fate of moral absolutes in history and culture. And I would like to suggest that what I just referred to as moral absolutes come in three kinds.

First, there exists a base set of genuinely self-evident, undeniably valid (and hence universally binding) rules of moral reason. At least in their abstract form they are not social constructions. Just as the mathematical intuition "two parallel lines cannot enclose a square" immediately (and without the need for deliberation) commands our respect as obviously true, so too the rules of moral reason. These are the kinds of rules of reason which 19th century and early 20th century philosophers called "moral intuitions." They are objective not subjective. That means they possess more than just that illusory air of self-evidence that is the commonplace atmosphere surrounding socially conditioned routines or habits. These moral absolutes are not illusory. They are not like the many declarations we assume to be self-evidently true simply because they are OUR declarations and familiar or popular in our social world. Here are some examples of the absolute or objective rules of moral reason: that one ought to give every person their due; treat like cases alike and different cases differently; impartially apply rules of general applicability; protect those who are vulnerable and in one's charge; respond to the urgent needs of others if the sacrifice or cost to oneself is slight.

Secondly, there is a base set of universal existential issues or what I have called "social existence themes" (or SETs). These themes are existential questions of great significance that must be answered in one way or another, if one is to have and sustain a way of life or create a tradition at all. Being existential questions that cannot be escaped. Because they are unavoidable questions, they are universal. Here are some examples of universal existential issues: the question of personal boundaries (what is me and what is not me?); the question of sex

identity (what is male and what is female?); the question of hierarchy (how should the burdens and benefits of life be distributed, and why?); the question of in-group versus outgroup differentiation (who is of my kind and who is not of my kind? Who can I trust and who can I not trust?).

Thirdly, there is the domain of objective values or goods. Within the field of cultural psychology some of these goods (desirable ends of genuine value) have been classified and arranged by various researchers. They have induced schemes for comparative research on moral judgments, for example “The Big Three of Morality” (the ethics of autonomy, the ethics of community and the ethics of divinity) or “Moral Foundations Theory.” Classified within such schemes are values or goods such as harm-reduction, justice, and equality (theorized as autonomy supporting values in the service of a preference seeking self), duty, hierarchy, respect, interdependency, and loyalty (theorized as community supporting values in the service of a social status maintaining self), and purity, sanctity, and cleanliness (theorized as divinity supporting values in the service of a self that feels connected to some higher transcendental realm).

Nevertheless, all of those moral absolutes or universals – the rules of moral reason (for example, “you ought to treat like cases alike and different cases differently”), the significant existential issues (for example, what is male and what is female?) and the objective values or goods (for example, loyalty) are given shape and substance, particularized and made concrete locally, NOT universally. Thus, the fate of moral absolutes in history is that they are implemented selectively and made manifest in distinctly local ways, resulting in different moral mentalities and various moral traditions. And that is where the problem of understanding and communicating across moral heritage traditions comes face to face with the problem of interpreting differences and with the choice between two alternative ways of doing so – pluralistic and developmental.

Let me conclude with a concrete example of a moral judgment and reasoning interview typifying the moral thinking of subjects in a particular non-“WEIRD” Hindu heritage community in a temple town in India. The concrete local behavior in question is “a widow in your community who eats fish two or three times a

week.” Locally, within this particular Hindu heritage community, the widow’s dietary behavior – eating fish three times a week - is viewed as a very serious moral transgression. (The interview comes from collaborative research conducted nearly forty years ago with Joan Miller and Manamohan Mahapatra).

Which mode of interpretation – pluralistic or developmental - would you apply to the moral mentality of a non-“WEIRD” Hindu subject who judges the widow’s behavior to be wrong and reasons about her behavior this way? The interview unfolds as follows:

Question: Is the widow’s behavior wrong?

Answer: Yes, widows should not eat fish, meat, onions or garlic or any hot foods. They must restrict their diet to cool foods, rice, dhal, ghee, vegetables.

Question: How serious is the violation?

Answer: It is a very serious violation. She will suffer greatly if she eats fish.

Question: Is it a sin?

Answer: Yes, it is a great sin.

Question: What if no one knew this had been done. It was done in secret or privately. Would it be wrong then?

Answer: What difference does it make if it is done while alone. It is wrong. A widow’s time should be spent seeking salvation, seeking to be reunited with the soul of her husband. Hot foods will distract her. They will stimulate her sexual appetite. She will lose her sanctity and behave like a prostitute.

Question: Would it be best if everyone in the world followed the rule that widows should not eat fish?

Answer: That would be best. A widow’s devotion is to her deceased husband – who should be treated like a god. She will offend his spirit if she eats fish.

Question: In the United States widows eat fish all the time. Would the United States be a better place if widows stopped eating fish?

Answer: Definitely it would be a better place. Perhaps American widows would stop having sex and marrying other men.

Question: What if most people in India wanted to change the rule so that it would all right for widows to eat fish. Would it be okay to change the rule?

Answer: No, it is wrong for a widow to eat fish. Hindu dharma – truth – forbids it.

Question: Do you think a widow who eats fish should be stopped or punished in some way?

Answer: She should be stopped, but the sin will live with her and she will suffer for it.

Imagine now how that interview would go if conducted with subjects from a “WEIRD” population. I can tell you how it would go. The interview would be a testament to the ethics of autonomy and to the notion that “everyone should be free to eat fish, if they want to.” There would be lots of talk about individual wants and preferences and the right of every individual to have the things she or he wants. “WEIRD” subjects frequently invoke a moral concept that never appeared in hundreds of interviews with Hindu temple town subjects; namely, in this instance, the idea of an inalienable unalterable unquestionable natural RIGHT to eat fish, if you want to.

Do you recall the interview probe concerning the alterability of the rule? What if we asked a typical “WEIRD” subject that question? “What if most people in the United States wanted to change the rule so that widows would be forbidden from eating fish? Would it be okay to change the rule?” Here is the way I imagine she or he might respond. “No you can’t do that. It is not okay to impose an oppressive sexist patriarchal rule forbidding widows from eating fish. Secular liberal dharma – truth – forbids it. All people in the world have a right to eat fish if they want to.”

So what was your own spontaneous snap mode of interpretation as you listened to the reasoning of the devout Hindu subject – pluralistic or developmental? Did the reasoning flood you with unpleasant feelings or not? And how should we evaluate our own spontaneous or reflexive interpretation of other peoples' customs? On the one hand, we are faced with the reasoning of a non-“Weird” Hindu subject, whose arguments are rich in references to moral values or goods such as loyalty/devotion and sanctity/purity, which are moral absolutes drawn from an ethics of community and an ethics of divinity. On the other hand, we are faced with the reasoning of a “WEIRD” subject, whose arguments are rich in references to freedom, wants, and the right to have the things you want, which are moral absolutes drawn from a liberal ethics of autonomy?

Is the reasoning of the two subjects different but equal or different but unequal, and why? Would you say, as I have said in some of my writings, that the illiberality of a cultural practice is not a measure of its immorality; that there can be moral universalism without moral uniformity; that instead of speaking of “traditional values” we should speak of various “traditions of value;” and that diversity in local cultural manifestations of moral absolutes IS their fate in history. Or, alternatively, would you interpret the ethics of autonomy of the “WEIRD” subject as superior and more advanced than the ethics of community and the ethics of divinity of the non-“WEIRD” Hindu subject? Are you a pluralist or are you a developmentalist?

I mentioned earlier that by the time I entered graduate school in cultural anthropology in 1966 the developmental interpretation of different modes of thought had gone out of fashion. Well as it turns out that displacement was only temporary. Developmental interpretations have been on the ascendency in anthropology ever since the rise of global feminism and of various other universalizing human rights and humanitarian projects in which global means universal and universal implies uniformity.

Over that same period of time empirical and interpretive work in “cultural psychology” has revived the descriptive study of heritage-based differences in how people think and the way culture and psyche make each other up.

Nevertheless I do wonder: For how long can we simply describe “differences” without facing up to the normative challenge of evaluating them? Is individualism better (or worse) than collectivism or are they just different and equal forms of social organization? Is analytic thinking superior (or inferior) to holistic thinking or are they just different but equal modes of thought? Is the interdependent self more (or less) developed than the independent self or are they just different but equal ways of being? Is the “WEIRD” subject simply a local historical rarity in a plural universe of human mentalities (“weird” only because of its infrequency or singularity in the historical record) or is “WEIRDNESS” the supposed next developmental stage in the progressive evolution of human consciousness? I will end this address by confessing that I don’t think that question can be finessed; and I hope it won’t be ducked.