

Foreword

Indigenous Psychology and the Moral Challenge of Robust Cultural Pluralism

This culturally nostalgic and heritage affirming collection of essays is largely concerned with the toxic effects of the idea that the West is best and the envy of the world. The book is a critique of the assumption that Western nations promote progressive social development when they use their power (hard and soft) to spread “Western” goals, values and pictures of reality to all corners of the globe. It is a critique of the view (so typical of the perspective of many liberal Western developmental theorists) that the “indigenous peoples” of the world are the slaves of their dead ancestors and would benefit by being liberated from their tradition-laden way of life, including their entrenched and outmoded conservative social customs and their superstitious and super-natural beliefs. The book aims to fairly and accurately represent the persistence of the goals, values and pictures of reality of various alternative cultural traditions. Special attention is given to collective resistance to Western globalization (or so-called neo-liberalism) and to local rejections of various hegemony-seeking Western ideologies: anti-communitarian individualism, competitive capitalism, and reductive and “soulless” secular materialism. Hence the focus in these essays on the spiritual nature of human beings, harmonious communalism, and the transcendental value and organic interdependent character of nature itself.

To my eyes, the book is a contemporary expression of a centuries old romantic philosophical and social science tradition skeptical of universalism, ecumenism and cosmopolitanism. The collection is an embrace (perhaps even a love affair) with particular ways of life grounded in durable bonds of ethnic, cultural, and religious community. Here in these essays the research discipline (and political movement) known as “indigenous psychology” gives voice to several of the tenets of the historical romantic rebellion against Western Enlightenment thought, for example, by rejecting of the idea and ideal of unilinear progressive societal development. The major aims of the book resonate well with an observation by the political and moral philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who draws the following contrast between enlightenment figures such as Voltaire and Condorcet and the

great romantic rebel (and in a sense a founder of indigenous psychology) Johann Herder. He writes: “

For Voltaire, Diderot, Helvetius, Holbach, Condorcet, there is only one universal civilization, of which now one nation, now another, represents the richest flowering. For Herder 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. Cosmopolitanism is the shedding of all that makes one most human, most oneself. (quoted in Gray 1996, p. 122)

Viewed as a contemporary voice of romanticism, this collection of essays seeks to restore what makes us most ourselves: community and divinity (that sense of being on speaking terms with something transcendental), ancestor worship and respect for the past, origin stories and teleology (the ends or ideals that are there in the beginning of any distinctive way of life and there too within ourselves, if we remain loyal and dedicated to the thick cultural heritage of a particular people).

The essays in the book also highlight a certain paradox for robust cultural pluralists (such as myself) who work on the indigenous psychology of morality. I specialize in the discovery of the moral foundations of diverse cultural traditions, both liberal and illiberal. There is more than a little irony in this type of calling. In fact, many (perhaps most) of the diverse cultural and religious traditions and indigenous peoples studied (and, in the case of the essays in this book, often admired) by cultural anthropologists and indigenous psychologists are notably illiberal in their beliefs and practices. These are local communities where the “folk” feel viscerally attached to a particular historical ethical community grounded in its own identity-defining metaphysical beliefs and origin stories or received legends of one sort or another. These are communities where the locals draw strong in-group versus out-group distinctions, do not believe that there but

for fortune goes you or goes I, do believe that gods, goddesses and the spirits of the dead play a continuing part in human history, feel duty bound to live up to the briefs for behavior distinctive of their social status in the community (which is often embedded in hierarchical interdependent relationships), and frequently discriminate in favor or against other individuals on the basis of sex , age, kinship ties, ethnicity and religion; while many of the robust cultural pluralists (including many professional indigenous psychologists) who study those traditions are themselves quite liberal and tend to equate the moral domain with values such as individual autonomy, non-discrimination, social justice, equality and freedom of choice. An investigator whose own moral thinking is steeped in a liberal ethics of autonomy seeks to understand and fairly represent the moral thinking of indigenous peoples and alternative cultural traditions whose moral thinking is rooted in an ethics of community and an ethic of divinity. It's quite a challenge.

Some cultural pluralists struggle with that irony throughout their careers, while trying to find ways to be robust cultural pluralists and ethical liberals at the same time. In that respect I have suggested in some of my own writings (for example, "Shouting at the Hebrews", which is a liberal pluralist's defense of the ancient Jewish custom of neonatal male circumcision) that the moral domain is much broader than the ethics of autonomy alone and thus the illiberalism of a practice is not necessarily a measure of its immorality (Shweder 2009).

Indeed the reconciliation of robust cultural pluralism and liberalism is rapidly becoming a major moral and public policy challenge both domestically (especially in various multi-ethnic multi-cultural politically liberal countries) and on a global scale. As the late great anthropologist Clifford Geertz presciently remarked some years ago, while writing with a sense of urgency in our migratory post-Cold War conflict-ridden world:

Positioning Muslims in France, Whites in South Africa, Arabs in Israel, or Koreans in Japan are not altogether the same sort of thing. But if political theory is going to be of any relevance at all in the splintered world, it will have to have something cogent to say about how, in the face of a drive towards a destructive integrity, such structures can be brought into being,

how they can be sustained, and how they can be made to work. (Geertz 2000: 257).

Such is one of the themes of this book.

So too is the theme that globalization is a flawed process leading to a problematic world-flattening “neo-liberal” order that has been hazardous to the well-being of its presumed beneficiaries, including the poorer countries and indigenous peoples of the world. There are calls in these essays for remedies and greater equality and reciprocity of voice in intergroup relationships.

Finally there is the emphasis on spirituality, in a sense that encompasses what might be referred to as “the big three of religion.” In the history of thought about the religions of the world it seems to me theorists tend to come in three kinds – those who define religion by focusing on the concept of the soul, those who define religion by focusing on the concept of the sacred, and those who define religion focusing on the idea of superior or super-natural beings. The soulful, the sacred and the super-natural are the three “S’s” of religion.

Here I recapitulate some thought about the three “S’s” that I have briefly mentioned in other writings (Shweder 2015). Human selves are capable of experiencing and recognizing themselves as soulful and supernatural in the sense of being capable of being the “unmoved mover”, able to initiate actions in ways that distinguish the “I” from other moved movers such as robots and other artifacts of the material or “natural” world (the equation of “Atman” – the animated personal self - with Brahman – the world soul or the divine - in Hinduism is an indigenous doctrinal version of this recognition).

Normal human beings are also capable of feeling a direct connection to what they experience as an elevated or dignifying realm of truth and value (a sacred realm, in the sense of being unquestionably good) that is inherently a potential source of human integrity. “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” is but one rather theistic way to give expression to the virtues or goods associated with the ethics of divinity or spirituality. Presumably one can even be an atheist (and reject all versions of the “Old Man in the sky pulling the strings” conception of divinity) and still experience

the moral domain guided by self-regulatory goods such as cleanliness, purity, pollution, sin, salvation and sanctity.

The Enlightenment recoil against the institutions of organized religion, the ultimate distrust expressed by many positive scientists of all metaphysical notions and the embrace of various versions of philosophical materialism may have inoculated many contemporary secular social scientists against words like “soul”, “sacred” or “super-natural.” But the concepts underlying those words are deeply embedded in the human experience of value and choice; and they play a part in the socialization of children and in the significance and meanings conveyed in daily activities such as the preparation of food, eating, bathing, going to bed and even how you dress in the morning and prepare yourself to meet the world. All this is well known to the various indigenous peoples and alternative cultural traditions you will encounter in this collection of essays on the “Indigenous Psychology of Spirituality.” “In the beginning is my end” is an appealing and uplifting invitation to the encounter.

References

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