

The Social Construction of Morality?

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"It is a pity that talk of the moral sentiments has fallen out of favor"
(Strawson 2008:35)

"Morality" and "morals" were central topics among sociologists at the turn of the last century but did not survive as a field of attention or inquiry. There were, of course, fields of study devoted to "norms" and "values," to "deviance" and "reciprocity" and, more specifically, there have been notable and influential studies of moral education, moral crusades and moral panics, but the notion that "morality" names a field of inquiry to which sociological ideas and techniques relate disappeared. The "sociology of knowledge" survived but the "sociology of morality" did not.

Indeed, the only discipline where "morality" and "moral" have remained central is, of course, moral philosophy. Moral philosophers have been, so to speak, the academic guardians of "morality." For the philosopher, I venture to suggest, sociology's withdrawal is not a matter for regret, since the very idea of sociology of a morality might seem to make what looks like an unacceptable assumption. This is the idea that the very category of the "moral" (and thus, within morality what counts as moral as opposed to immoral) is, as they say, a "social construction": that it is socially shaped and will vary from one historical period and one social context to another, so that there are (to use an opaque phrase that will, I hope, become somewhat less so) *multiple moralities*, of which our own is only one among others (talk of "moralities" is as unfamiliar to moral philosophers as talk of "knowledge" is to epistemologists).

Moral philosophers are, with few (and thus striking) exceptions committed to the enterprise of finding the best account of moral thinking or reasoning. They seek to justify and criticize the judgments we make when faced with moral issues. They debate with one another, at different levels, about the question: what is the right way to reach correct or objective or the best-justified moral judgments? How, they ask, is one to decide moral questions? They may give complex or indecisive or multiple or skeptical or despairing answers, but that is their question. From this standpoint, the assumption indicated cannot be entertained. For if it were to be upheld, "morality" would cease to be the name of a stable and unified field: what is to count as "moral" (and thus, I repeat, what is "moral" and what is "immoral") would be seen as varying indefinitely from context to context and subject to empirical inquiry. In this chapter, I shall examine that assumption: namely, the assumption that both the content and the scope of morality vary indefinitely across different societies and contexts? Is there, in short, a convincing way for us to identify "morality" as a field for sociological inquiry and research that

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does not express and endorse our own moral outlook and thereby prejudice the limits of moral diversity?

The English word “morality” has a range of meanings and is used in different contexts. We can distinguish two broad ranges of usage: high and low. Talk of morality is central to the reflections of certain kinds of intellectuals, notably philosophers, theologians, clergymen and educators; but there is also a second, everyday “lay” or “folk” conception, or range of conceptions, of morality which overlap but do not coincide with the various versions of the first. In addition, then there are the natural and social scientists, coming from various disciplines, who seek to analyze and explain moral judgments and behavior (and is it obvious that morality is appropriate as an analytical or *scientific* category?) What is clear is that what “morality” denotes is subject to endless contestation.

Consider first the philosophers. G.J. Warnock starts from the Humean idea of “limited sympathies.” He thinks that “the general object” of morality is to cultivate good dispositions, or moral virtues, and provide moral principles that will counteract these “limited sympathies” and their potentially most damaging effects. It is, he suggests, “the proper business of morality, and the general object of moral evaluation, to expand our sympathies, or, better, to reduce the liability to damage inherent in their natural tendency to be narrowly restricted.” (Warnock 1971:26) A Kantian view of morality, on the other hand, focuses on the Moral Law and the idea that a good person is exclusively motivated by the duties or obligations it imposes, indeed, in Bernard Williams’s phrase it tries “to make everything into obligations.” (Williams 1985:180). On this view, morality involves self-denying values imposing law-like obligations and is pervaded by the language of rights and duties, commands, guilt and blame. Contrast both these pictures with the predominant utilitarianism in the English-speaking countries in recent times, with its consequentialist focus on calculating, measuring, aggregating and maximizing pleasures or preference-satisfaction or welfare or on minimizing suffering, and with the revival of virtue ethics, with its roots in Aristotle, focusing on the conditions of human flourishing or the enabling of human capabilities or the cultivation of character. In addition, what about the scope and distribution of moral concern? Do moral judgments or rules apply to all and to all equally? For Kurt Baier adopting “the moral point of view” means acting on “rules which are meant for everybody” and which are “for the good of everyone alike” (Baier 1958:208), and yet, as Brian Leiter reminds us, Nietzsche clearly repudiates this “egalitarian premise of all contemporary moral and political theory—the premise, in one form or another, of the equal worth and dignity of each person.” (Leiter 2008:290).

These few examples are enough to suggest, not only the contestedness of the concept of morality among philosophers, but also the peculiarity of that contest. For to practice moral philosophy is to assume that it is a contest that can be won—that arguing and theorizing can in principle achieve its resolution. And yet, although the last hundred years of philosophical reasoning and debate have indeed hugely clarified the issues, they have brought us no nearer to such resolution. Nietzsche offered an interesting diagnosis of the reason why:

It is precisely because moral philosophers knew the facts of morality only somewhat vaguely in an arbitrary extract or chance abridgement, as morality of their environment, their class, their church, the spirit of their times, their climate and zone of the earth, for instance—it was precisely because they were so ill-informed and not even very inquisitive about other peoples, ages and former times, that they did not so much as catch sight of the real problems of morality—for these come into view only if we compare *many* moralities (Nietzsche 1990:186)

Anthropologists, on the contrary, are engaged in doing just that. Traditionally they favored a far more capacious and relativizing approach than the philosophers did. Their professional concern was with what I have called the “low” sense of morality, with morality as viewed by its practitioners—with morality as *mores*. Thus William Graham Sumner wrote that “immoral never means anything but contrary to the mores of the time and place” (Sumner 1960:355) and Ruth Benedict wrote that “morality... is a convenient term for socially approved habits.” (Benedict 1956:73).

However, this is clearly a thoroughly inadequate approach, since we want to know both how locals distinguish moral from non-moral customs and habits (as they typically do) and how to do so ourselves. Here, more recent anthropologists, though they have provided some clues, have not helped much. For, as James Laidlaw has observed, despite “some individually brilliant discussions of morality by anthropologists” and the fact that some “of the greatest ethnographies are dominated by the explication of moral concepts and reasoning,” we do not have an account of what makes such concepts and reasoning moral, for “there is no anthropology of ethics” and “no connected history we can tell ourselves about the study of morality in anthropology, as we do for a range of topics such as kinship, the economy, the state, or the body” (Laidlaw 2002:312, 311).

Should we, then, look to the psychologists for help? For in recent times, they have been exploring the question of which traits and capacities are universal (perhaps because innate) and which are subject to cultural variation. In addition, here morality has been a central concern generating a range of interesting and conflicting hypotheses. Eliot Turiel and his colleagues (see Turiel 1983, 2002) have sought to show that children from a very early age are able to distinguish between the domains of the moral and the conventional. Children, they claim, can distinguish between, and react differently to, moral and conventional norms. In particular, they distinguish between rules prohibiting injury, theft, or promise breaking, on the one hand, and rules prohibiting inappropriate dress, bad manners or talking in class, on the other. Moral transgressions, they propose, are more serious, usually involve harming victims, and are independent of the say-so of authorities, and involve rules that are general in scope and are justified by appeal to harm, justice and rights. Conventional transgressions, by contrast, are less serious, and the rules are dependent on the dictates of particular authorities, local in scope, and not justified by reference to harm, justice, or rights. They conclude that their subjects, when questioned about transgressions of rules of both types, judged this distinction between domains as both psychologically real and important. The idea is that these are seen as distinct conceptual domains to which different responses are appropriate because compliance is justified by different kinds of reasons. Furthermore, they claim that their conclusions are supported by evidence that this basic division is drawn from toddlers to adults across cultures, classes, and economic classes.

Yet, this claim of universally recognized domains has met with severe and broadly convincing criticism. Apart from the citing of contrary evidence, the central objections are several. First, consider seriousness. Some seemingly conventional breaches can be desperately serious. Jon Elster recounts the story of a young officer in pre-Revolutionary France, wealthy but not noble, who, having tried to gatecrash a party at Versailles, was driven to suicide by the ridicule with which he was greeted (Elster 2007:364). Conversely, actions plainly accepted as immoral, such as corruption and white-collar crime, are often treated with little concern and even indifference. Second, as for harm, justice and rights, seemingly conventional practices, such as scarification, can be harmful, while violations of prevailing morality, such as consensual gay

sex, harm no one and invade no-one's rights. Third, as for authority-independence, consider the story of Abraham and Isaac and the fact that Jews and Moslems, for instance, view dietary laws as moral because commanded by God. Conversely, most conventional rules are followed irrespective of the dictates of any particular authority. In short, the suggested criteria do not succeed in mapping a difference between kinds of norms as they function in social life. Moreover, it often happens that conventions appear to have a moral aspect (if you fail to observe a conventional norm of politeness, say, you show disrespect and breaking traffic regulations can put others in danger). In general, as Jesse Prinz observes, the "very same act can count as a moral violation or as a conventional violation depending on how it is described." (Prinz 2008:386).

Perhaps, then, we should endorse Prinz's suggestion that the moral/conventional distinction is not a distinction between kinds of rules but should rather be understood as distinguishing "dimensions of rules that we *regard* as moral, and dimensions of rules that we *regard* as merely conventional." (Prinz 2008:386). (Here "we" refers, presumably, to the psychologists and the locals, to both observers and observed). What, then, distinguishes the moral way of regarding rules from the conventional way? Prinz's answer is that "the moral dimensions of rules are psychologically grounded in moral sentiments." More specifically he proposes that "any dimension of a rule enforced by emotions of self-blame and other blame and directed at third parties qualifies as a moral rule." (Prinz 2008:386). *Mature* moral judgments, he suggests, "are enforced by meta-emotions. If you do something wrong and don't feel guilty, I will be angry at you for your conduct and for your lack of remorse." In sum, to "have a moral attitude towards ϕ -ing," he writes, "one must have a moral sentiment that disposes one to feel a self-directed emotion of blame for ϕ -ing, and an emotion of other directed blame when someone else ϕ s" (Prinz 2008:369) (So, for example, when "we say that it is 'morally wrong' to disrespect others, we express our belief that we would blame someone for disrespecting others"). Then, significantly, Prinz comments that "the disposition for blaming people for behaving in some way may itself be a culturally inculcated value." In addition, notice that the very claim that morality is grounded in moral sentiments is controversial. Rationalists, such as Kantians, who ground morality in the ability to form and act on judgments of what ought to do, will not agree. Nor may those psychologists whose hypothesis is that moral judgments arise out of innately given pre-rationalized intuitions (see Haidt and Joseph 2004) or grounded in an intuitive and unconscious moral grammar (see Hauser 2006). In addition, among those who do agree, Prinz's proposal is only one among others, and yet, as I shall argue, it is along the right lines.

What I have so far sought to show is that there is wide, persistent and seemingly irresolvable disagreement over the criteria for applying the concept of "morality," over what lies within the scope of moral appraisals and judgments and what does not. Philosophers disagree not only about the best or appropriate way to reach and justify moral judgments but also over what moral judgments are: over how to define what morality is. Anthropologists and psychologists are similarly non-convergent. Indeed, it would seem that differing answers to this question are inextricably tied to different moral outlooks: that how one conceives of "morality" reveals and expresses one's own morality: that is, one's first-order moral judgments, values, and principles.

However, this is not the only sense in which morality may be thought of as multiple. For, as Charles Taylor has observed, "one of the big illusions shared by moral philosophers is the belief that there is a single consistent domain of the 'moral', that there is one set of

considerations, or mode of calculation, which determines what we ought 'morally' to do". (Taylor 1985:233). As I shall now argue, it is by no means obvious that "morality" names a unified object or field.

Is there any reason to think that the moral domain is unified by a distinctive set of common concerns?¹ The anthropologist Richard Shweder and his colleagues have proposed the hypothesis, based on fieldwork in India, that there are in all cultures three broad domains of moral discourse—three "culturally coexisting discourses of morality"—namely, "the ethics of autonomy," "the ethics of community" and "the ethics of divinity." Their idea is that, within the Hindu social order, these foster different types of "goods," each indispensable and all enhancing human dignity and self-esteem; and that, in general, cultures "differ in the degree to which one or another of the ethics and corresponding moral 'goods' predominate in the development of social practices and in the elaboration of a moral ideology" (Shweder et al 1997:140–142).

With similar implications but in a different idiom, the psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph have proposed that one should think of morality as *modular*. Their focus is on moral intuitions—"fast and automatic responses to specific environmental triggers" that they conceive as "primitive and innate, or at least innately prepared" in the human evolutionary past and as undergirding "the moral systems that cultures develop, including their understandings of virtues and character." (Haidt and Joseph 2004:60, 61, 56). They suggest that there are four such modules that correspond to distinct stimuli: namely, suffering, hierarchy, reciprocity/fairness, and purity. (In addition, they add a possible fifth "ingroup module" with the associated emotion of loyalty). They think of such intuitions as distinct "pattern-recognition systems" that "often launch moral emotions" and generate distinct complexes of what are seen as virtues in different cultures. In addition, elsewhere, Haidt has suggested that distinct emotions are elicited by distinct kinds of immorality. In general, write Haidt and Joseph, morality is "innate (as a small set of modules) and socially constructed (as sets of interlocking virtues)." (Haidt and Joseph 2004:64). Morality, on such views, in short, is composed of non-unified, distinct elements that, in combination, yield different social moralities.

Should we, then, think of morality as "socially constructed" and what would that thought precisely amount to? Here we can find help from Ian Hacking's checklist (Hacking 1999) of the three component ideas that the notion of "social construction" comprises: namely, (1) *contingency*: the thought that what is claimed to be socially constructed could have been quite otherwise—so that, for example, there could have been an equally successful physics in no sense equivalent to existing physics; (2) *nominalism*: the thought that our categories and classifications are not fixed by the nature of things or the structure of the world but by our linguistic conventions; and (3) *externalism*: the thought that we believe what we do, not because of the reasons that appear to justify what we believe, but because of factors such as the influence of the powerful or of social interests or of institutional imperatives or of social networks.

Beginning with the last, it is clear that, just as (3) lies at the origin of "the sociology of knowledge," so, comparably, it sets out part of what must be the agenda of a sociology of morality: namely, the role of the powerful and dominant interests, and alongside them moral entrepreneurs, within social institutions and networks, in drawing moral boundaries, imposing

¹ For this section, I am indebted to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, whose contribution to the 2009 conference on the sociology of morality (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009) I found both stimulating and instructive.

moral standards, inculcating moral ideologies and defining moral virtues. Clearly, it embraces a vast array of existing sociological works, both historical and contemporary, that examine the extent of and limits to such influence, from studies of the respectable poor and of forms of patriarchy to contemporary studies of evangelical Christianity or the teaching of ethics in business schools, and also the various reformist and conflict-reducing uses of "moral power," as discussed in this volume by Jal Mehta and Christopher Winship. Seeing such work and future such studies through this lens helps focus attention on the social actors and social determinants that, to a greater or lesser extent, influence what I have called low conceptions of morality.

However, it also, of course, helps focus attention on the manifold ways in which individuals and groups escape and resist such influences. Huckleberry Finn was acting morally when he resisted his "duty" to turn in Jim the slave, as were those who rescued and protected Jews during the Holocaust and there was a "moral life" within the concentration camps (see Todorov 1996). Thus, for instance, a moral sociology in this vein would attend to moral codes generated within counter-cultural and deviant subcultures but also, to what James Scott calls the "arts of resistance" (see Dodson 2009). Scott, who focuses on domination in highly stratified societies and institutions, suggests that there are two kinds of evidence of such resistance. On the one hand, there are the "hidden transcripts"—generated in secluded settings, behind the scenes in the victims' "life apart in the slave quarters, the village, the household, and in religious and ritual life," in "a social space in which offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relations may be voiced," in forms such as "linguistic disguises, ritual codes, taverns, fairs, the 'hush arbors of slave religion' and consisting in 'hopes of a returning prophet, ritual aggression via witchcraft, celebration of bandit heroes and resistance martyrs.'" (Scott 1990:85, xi). On the other hand, there are the open but disguised expressions of ideological insubordination that can be decoded by interpreting "the rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes and theater of the powerless as vehicles by which, among other things, they insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct." (Scott 1990:xiii).

(1) and (2), however, raise a different kind of question: namely, whether there are limits to what can be constructed in the name of morality. Specifically, can we adduce reasons based on "natural" facts—facts about human nature and about how human beings interact socially—fixing boundaries around what is to count as morality, within which variation occurs, thereby setting an agenda for the sociology of morality? Is there a prospect of identifying a distinctive, trans-human way in which people interact and relate to one another which will satisfy the following three demands: (1) that it is compatible with most commonly accepted meanings of "morality" and "moral"; (2) that it is compatible with the main alternative philosophical theories of morality; and (3) that it allows for wide variation in empirical realizations in the form of moral judgments, behavior, codes and practices?

The philosopher P. F. Strawson made two suggestions that, I believe, offer, in combination, a promising way of answering this question. In the first place, Strawson wrote that

certain human interests are so fundamental and general that they must be universally acknowledged in some form and to some degree in any conceivable moral community.

Allowing for the possible diversity of moral systems and the possible diversity of demands within a system, Strawson wrote, the recognition of

certain general virtues and obligations will be a logically or humanly necessary feature of almost any conceivable moral system: these will include the abstract virtue of justice, some form of mutual aid and to mutual abstention from injury and, in some form and in some degree, the virtue of honesty. (Strawson 1970:111)²

In a later, justly famous, and influential essay, Strawson developed a further idea that significantly advances this "naturalistic" approach: namely the claim that there is a range of distinctive "reactive attitudes" that "have common roots in our human nature and our membership of human communities." (Strawson 2008:29) These "participant reactive attitudes are essentially natural human reactions to the good or ill will or indifference of others towards us as displayed in their attitudes and actions" (25); they reveal "how much we actually mind, how much it matters to us, whether the actions of other people—and particularly of some other people—reflect attitudes towards us of goodwill, affection or esteem, on the one hand or contempt, indifference, or malevolence on the other." (22) As evidence, Strawson cites the difference it makes to us whether or not we see an injury we incur as resulting from the actions of an agent or agents for which he or they were *responsible* (and there is a range of different reasons why they might not be). Strawson's suggestion is made in the context of discussing freewill and determinism—a discussion into which we will not enter. Here the key point to notice is his claim that "our natural human commitment" to these "ordinary interpersonal attitudes" is "part of the general framework of human life." (28) His idea, in short, is that human beings "naturally" engage in the practice of holding one another responsible for benefits and injuries and in doing so display a range of "attitudes" that respond to what they perceive as good or ill will or indifference of others; and that these attitudes express an engaged "first-person" perspective of participants in the practice.

Which are these "reactive attitudes"—these "non-detached attitudes or reactions of people directly involved in transactions with each other"? Strawson first offers a few examples: "attitudes and reactions of offended parties and beneficiaries," such things as "gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings," (21) observing that they arise in "ordinary interpersonal relationships, ranging from the most intimate to the most casual." (23) But then he develops a typology of three kinds of such attitudes: (1) personal attitudes, such as resentment, which react directly to ill will or indifference of others to ourselves; (2) "sympathetic or vicarious" attitudes. These are "impersonal or disinterested or generalized analogues" of the first kind. These

rest on, and reflect, exactly the same expectation or demand in a generalized form...for the manifestation of goodwill and regard, on the part of others, not simply towards oneself, but towards all those on whose behalf moral indignation may be felt, i.e., as we now think, towards all men. (29)

And, just as (1) concerns demands on others for oneself and (2) concerns demands on others for others, there are (3) "self-reactive attitudes" associated with "demands on oneself for others": notably "feeling bound or obliged (the 'sense of obligation'); feeling compunction; feeling guilty or remorseful or at least responsible; and the more complicated phenomenon of shame." (29)

² This suggestion is reminiscent of H. L. A. Hart's 'minimum content' of Natural Law (Hart 1994:102, 103)

Strawson himself suggested that we should speak specifically of the second category as “moral,” arguing that it is “the impersonal or vicarious character of the attitude” that entitles it to this qualification. But I suggest that we discard this suggestion (seeing this view of morality as morality in its narrower sense) and (seeking a broader sense) focus rather on the indicated practice, as such: on his claim to have identified a “general framework of attitudes” that we are “given with the fact of human society.” (35), a “complicated web of attitudes and feelings which form an essential part of the moral life as we know it.” By attending to this range of attitudes, we can “recover from the facts as we know them a sense of what we mean, i.e. of all we mean, when, speaking the language of morals, we speak of desert, responsibility, guilt, condemnation, and justice.” (34)

What does “the moral life” thus understood exclude? Significantly, Strawson refers to what he calls the “objective attitude,” which he sees as “profoundly opposed” to the “involved or participation in a human relationship” that these attitudes share. To adopt the objective attitude to another human being

is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of senses, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary, account of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply avoided. . . . (24–25)

Adopting the objective attitude, writes Strawson, is “a consequence of our viewing the agent as incapacitated in some or all respects for ordinary interpersonal relationships.” (26)

There are several gains in viewing morality in this broad way. First, it offers, as a sociological agenda, a way of identifying and investigating multiple moralities as species of a common genus, exemplifying varying ways in which these attitudes are manifested in different cultural and social contexts, in which some attitudes may be more or less predominant and others even absent. Indeed, one can view the “reactive attitudes” as constituting a trans-human repertoire, an arc of possibilities from which different moralities draw, emphasizing some and de-emphasizing others, sometimes to the point of suppression or exclusion. It also enables one to see where the “objective attitude” is at work—sometimes in ways that do not involve the suspension of ordinary reactive attitudes (as when inflicting punishment or treating, say, the mentally ill) but sometimes in ways that do (as when, say, racism involves social exclusion). In this way, the approach offers a kind of “bridgehead” into the understanding of alien moral worlds, about which one can ask what are the distinctive grounds within them for experiencing and exhibiting moral sentiments, and the limits to doing so.

One may, of course, wonder whether at least some of these reactive attitudes, so described, are not themselves culturally specific rather than natural to humans. Strawson himself commented on the “increased historical and anthropological awareness of the great variety of forms which these human attitudes may take at different times and in different cultures” and declared that one should therefore be

chary of claiming as essential features of the concept of morality in general, forms of these attitudes which may have a local and temporary prominence. No doubt to some extent my own descriptions of human attitudes have reflected local and temporary features of our own culture.

But, he concluded,

an awareness of variety of forms should not prevent us from acknowledging also that in the absence of any forms of these attitudes it is doubtful that we should have anything that we could find intelligible as a system of human relationships, as human society. (36)

Which leads me to a further advantage of this account of a distinctively human framework or web of reactive attitudes. For it offers, I suggest, the most helpful and comprehensive way of conceiving of human uniqueness in the active current debates about morality in animals. Thus Frans de Waal has asked the (rhetorically intended) question: “What is different about the way we *act* that makes us, and not any other species, moral beings?” (de Waal 1996:111). De Waal stresses “the continuity between human social instincts and those of our closest relatives, the monkeys and the apes” (de Waal et al. 2009:37) and, in general, “the profound similarities between human and animal behavior (e.g. maternal care, sexual behavior, power seeking).” (65). He has advocated anthropomorphism – “the description of animal behavior in human, hence intentionalistic terms” (de Waal et al. 2009:63) – as a strategy for the description of animal behavior, not as a projection of “human emotions and intentions onto animals without justification, explication or investigation” (64) but with the scientist’s goal of arriving at “testable ideas and replicable observations” (63). Specifically, he has focused on empathy, “targeted helping” (also found among dolphins and elephants), reciprocal altruism and (he claims) fairness among monkeys and even gratitude among chimpanzees. Needless to say, much of this is highly controversial, not only among animal scientists, but also among philosophers.

Thus the Kantian Christine Korsgaard robustly asserts that what is key is “the ability to be motivated by an ought.” (Korsgaard 2009:117). The non-human animal, she claims, has “purposes. . . given to him by his affective states,” whereas

the capacity for normative self-government and the deeper level of intentional control that goes with it is probably unique to human beings. And it is in the proper use of this capacity—the ability to form and act on judgments of what we ought to do—that the essence of morality lies, not in altruism or the pursuit of the greater good. (116)

And she observes that for Adam Smith too the impartial spectator (the “man in the breast”) is at work judging the propriety of our feelings and motives—when, that is, it is “proper” for us to experience them—and thus enhancing our capacity to be motivated by thoughts of what we ought to do and ought to be like. And Philip Kitcher too, while noticing that de Waal’s argument relies on “the sentimental tradition in ethical theory” in suggesting that the animals in question display sympathy or altruism, observes that this is not yet morality: that what is needed is “a capacity for normative guidance and self-control.” For sympathy, even when enlarged, is not enough. For without a device such as the impartial spectator, there are only “limited and idiosyncratic sympathies, types of psychological altruism that may be necessary if moral responses are to develop. . . but fall a long way short of morality” –not least because “altruistic dispositions are too weak, often of the wrong kinds, and because conflicting altruistic impulses need adjudication.” (Kitcher 2009:133,134).

My suggestion is that Strawson’s scheme of reactive attitudes offers a really helpful way of identifying moral dispositions by showing that device at work, engaged in determining when one or another such attitude is “proper” and thus when and how to respond to others’ attitudes towards us, when to hold whom responsible for injuries, and how to distinguish attitudes of “goodwill, affection or esteem, on the one hand or contempt, indifference, or malevolence on the other.” In this way, it provides an effective way of discriminating (given

all the evidence) which concepts appear applicable uniquely to humans (such as "resentment," "indignation," "guilt," and "shame"). It also enables us to distinguish between *different* ways of understanding those concepts that appear applicable across the human/non-human divide, such as empathy, sympathy, and the like. Such concepts can be given, so to speak, a "thinner" or a "thicker" interpretation. Thus, "sympathy" among apes and chimpanzees is not only, as Kitcher has argued, "limited and idiosyncratic" in intensity, range, extent and skill, but crucially lacks an adjudication device, leaving them "vulnerable to whichever impulse happens to be dominant at a particular moment." (Kitcher 2009:136). And it is questionable, for instance, whether the grooming service performed by chimpanzees for those individuals who previously shared food with them registers, as de Waal suggests, "a psychological mechanism known in humans as 'gratitude'"—namely, a feeling of thankfulness in appreciation of the kindness, or perceived goodwill, of another.

I have sought to show in what way it is plausible to see morality as socially constructed and in what way it is not. Both "high" and "low" or folk conceptions of what is moral (and thus moral and immoral) conduct are remarkably divergent across time and space. This "diversity of morals" is a traditional, long-forgotten but recoverable part of the agenda of sociology and social anthropology (see Ginsberg 1956, Snare 1980). The idea of "social construction" can help focus attention on the role of dominant elites and moral entrepreneurs in shaping and sustaining moral codes, and in encouraging reforms and resolving conflicts, and on investigating the limits to their moral power.

But what is the diversity of morals a diversity of? Is the very idea of what is moral "socially constructed" in the sense that there are just different answers, or is there a common object of inquiry and research such that different moralities can be seen as distinct species of a common genus? I have argued that Strawson's notion of "reactive attitudes" provides a positive answer and thus presents a viable agenda for the sociology of morality. These attitudes can be seen as forming a repertoire of moral sentiments that are realized in strikingly different ways in different social contexts. The repertoire itself is not socially constructed but a "natural" part of "the general framework of human life"; its various social, culturally conditioned realizations are widely diverse and sometimes deeply conflicting and incompatible. What is the role of honor, pride, respect, guilt, sympathy, or compassion, resentment, remorse, gratitude, forgiveness, love, shame, disgust and so on in motivating behavior of differently situated individuals in different social and institutional settings? What, for instance, are the historical origins and social bases of different configurations of these sentiments and their corresponding virtues and vices? How, for example, did hierarchical notions of honor become transformed into egalitarian notions of respect, with a corresponding democratization of the notion of "dignity" (see Waldron 2007)? And under what conditions do the limits of moral concern contract and expand?

Recognition of the diversity of moralities is thus compatible with, indeed requires, a coherent account of what morality is. But (I should add, without elaborating the argument here³) to recognize such diversity is not to acquiesce in an attitude of moral relativism. Such recognition is from an observer's perspective and the relativist makes the illegitimate inference

29. The Social Construction of Morality?

that one can transfer one's observations into the first-person perspective of a moral agent, a participant in the practice of morality.

I conclude with a final example: the case of the Nazis. From the end of the Second World War until today, the Nazis have represented for countless moral philosophers the epitome of radical evil—the paradigm of what is beyond the moral domain. On the approach recommended here, we should rather inquire both into the extraordinary success of the Nazi leaders in securing not only compliance but enthusiasm on such a large scale; and into the moral attitudes of the various kinds of Nazi perpetrators, investigating how, when and on what basis they experienced and exhibited resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, regret, indignation, guilt, pride and shame, and so on.⁴ We should also inquire into the limits of their morality, where the participant, reactive attitudes are replaced by the most extreme form of the "objective attitude" in which other human beings are treated as beyond the human pale.⁵

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CHAPTER 30

What's New and What's Old about the New Sociology of Morality

GABRIEL ABEND

OLD-NEW SOCIOLOGY OF MORALITY¹

Question: What's "the science which, of all the sciences which have yet opened upon men, is, perhaps, the least cultivated, the least definite, the least ascertained in itself, and the most difficult in its application"? Answer: "[T]he science of Morals." So claimed Harriet Martineau (1838:3) in her book *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, some 170 years ago. Yet, however little cultivated the "science of Morals" might have been in the 1830s, it surely made major strides in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In 1869 two important works appeared: Irish historian W. E. H. Lecky's two-volume *History of European Morals* ([1869]1884) and French philosopher Charles Renouvier's two-volume *Science de la morale* ([1869]2002). In France the science of morality would soon start to gather momentum. Durkheim's version—variously called *science de la morale*, *science des faits moraux*, or *physique des mœurs*—developed over the course of 30 years: from his article "La science positive de la morale en Allemagne" (1887) to the introduction to his unfinished treatise *La Morale* (1917). Equally influential was Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1903) book, *La Morale et la science des mœurs*, which only two years later was already available in English as *Ethics and Moral Science*. As Dominique Parodi observed, there was at the time much excitement around the sociology of morality: "people don't grow tired of discussing the connections between *la morale* and sociology; and it is the same problem that fills most contemporary publications" (quoted in Merlié 2004:426; my translation²). Or, as Bayet (1905:1) put it, "[t]he idea that *la morale*, for a long time religious or metaphysical, must henceforth rest on science,

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