Moral Progress: Practical Not Theoretical

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Richard Shweder asks us to consider the allocation of our moral assets, much as a financial planner might ask us to consider a prudent allocation of financial assets. The moral asset categories are knowledge or certainty, mere value preference, and moral indeterminacy. Shweder finds President Bush and his advisors to be too-self-assured; they bet all their chips on moral certainty. Like various other fundamentalists, they are certain they are in the right and God is on their side. Judge Posner, by contrast, is too uncertain; he places all of his chips on mere preference; for him there can be no moral knowledge or certainty. Because we all must act, Judge Posner would have us attempt to realize our own preferences, by force if necessary.

The President and the Judge are mere "types" for Shweder. His worry is really about cosmopolitan participants in the new global discourse, leaders of progressive social movement and human advocacy groups and global non-governmental organizations. They appear broadly informed and open-minded, just like us and our fellow academics. We like and admire them, and so it really matters to us that they keep their moral assets in balance. But they, too often, bet too many chips on moral certainty. That is the problem Shweder wishes to address.

Shweder finds grounds for a prudent re-allocation of their assets in Berlin's value theory. Berlin, like Posner, acknowledges a large domain of uncertainty, but he does not limit this domain to mere preference, or base it on a relativism that would sacrifice all grounds for rational moral discernment. Rather, on Berlin's view some moral values are objective; the problem is that these objective values too often conflict in real-world moral situations. Thus, the situations are often indeterminate, not because there are no grounds for objective moral judgment in general, but because in interesting cases the grounds cancel one another out. For Shweder, Berlin's theory thus points to a prudent balance, in which a little may be invested in certainty, some more in mere preference, while most must be allocated to the uncertain or indeterminate category.

SHWEDER'S CASE MATERIAL AND BERLIN'S MORAL THEORY

Shweder uses his case material (genital surgery, the Tuskegee study), to show that "thick description" can slow us down in our moral judgment and make us cautious about our certainties. I do not want to comment on the particulars of his cases. But I do want to cast doubt on the fit between Shweder's use of these cases and Berlin's theory of objective moral values in conflict.

Shweder says that those rushing to judgment about genital surgery, for example, actually have their facts wrong. A "thick description" shows that the practice"*adds* to, rather than subtracts from, female self-respect and group power, and does *not* inhibit sexual pleasure. If he is right, we should re-allocate outside interference with the practice from "certainly right" to "certainly wrong." Genital surgery is different than our practices, but violates none of our moral rules. So long as we and the African

groups live apart, we can simply "live and let live." And when the latter groups settle among us, the initial appearance of conflict among moral values disappears once we get over our aversions and get our facts straight.

Thus, the problem is thus not one of re-allocating a judgment from certainty to indeterminacy; rather it is a practical problem of facilitating inter-group understanding, and re-negotiating existing legal and practical arrangements on an as- needed basis. Berlin's theory of value thus appears to have nothing to contribute to the resolution of the problem.

ETHNOCENTRISM AND THE "VIEW FROM MANYWHERES"

Shweder invites us to leave our monistic, culture-centric viewpoint behind and take a "view from manywheres." The view from somewhere, he says, is ethnocentric; from everywhere, incoherent; from nowhere, nihilistic. Interestingly the "view from manywheres" is the professional anthropologist's view, the view grounded in participant observation of many different cultures. So Shweder invites us to shed our ethnocentrism for anthrocentrism.

This is problematic, as it assumes that anthropologists can, as it were, enter into the spirit of the native, take the native viewpoint. But this is not what happens in the general case. Participant observers remain cosmopolitans in exotic locations. If they really "go native" like "Dances with Wolves," they squander their anthropological perspective; to retain it they add a layer of imperfect and contested information and interpretation to their original core of liberal, rational cosmopolitanism. That viewpoint is then their own "view from somewhere." Neither anthrocentrism nor anything else offers any escape from "the view from somewhere."

This would indeed be a problem if Shweder's equation of the "view from somewhere" with ethnocentrism were valid, but it is not. Ethnocentrism is not the view from somewhere; it is rather that view from somewhere that takes itself to be the view from everywhere. The cosmopolitan view shared by many academic professionals and progressive social movement participants is a view from somewhere in particular, of course, but the particular matters greatly. The liberal cosmopolitan view derives from many acts of historical transcendence of group limitations: Socrates eroding the moral certainties of the Athenians; Jesus of the Pharisees; Luther of the Roman Church. This cosmopolitan heritage is our birthright. If participants in the global moral discourse sometimes fall into self-righteousness, this may be because we academics have transmitted this birthright so poorly. We would be on firmer grounds if we attributed their shortcomings to our own as teachers, rather than to alleged necessary limitations of our inherited point of view.

Two cultural vulnerabilities of cosmopolitan liberalism must, however, be acknowledged. On the one hand, initially progressive and cosmopolitan attitudes and views may ossify into closed habits and dogmas; a liberal, progressive surface may come to mask a deep self-certainty. This is the real worry about "political correctness" — not that it reflects liberal bias, but that it demonstrates a counterfeit liberality that is not self-correcting. On the other hand, just because a true liberal stance *is* genuinely self-critical, it can erode into the "view from nowhere," as in the case of the freshman who is so open-minded his brains fall out. My point is simply

that there is much in our particular culture, our *ethnos*, that is open and pluralistic. We do not need a "view from manywheres" to combat ethnocentrism.

VALUES, NORMS, AND MORAL RULES

The cultural anthropologist as a positive scientist is vulnerable to a certain empirical bias, seeing all of a society's norms and conventions, its values and its moral rules as just so many normatively equivalent social facts. Shweder uses all of these terms more or less indiscriminately, and sometimes runs them together. After quoting Berlin to the effect that "human *values* are many…often in conflict and rarely if ever necessarily harmonious," for example, Shweder adds: "In other words, some "*moral conflicts* are insolvable or undecideable by rational reflection."

But these categories are not normatively equivalent. First, it should hardly surprise us that *values* and *norms* are often in conflict, both with themselves and with *moral rules*. A husband, drawn to an attractive and unattached younger woman, values sexual pleasure but also values family harmony. If he has an affair, his behavior is in conflict with the moral prohibition of adultery. A young girl promises to comfort a friend, who has learned that her mother is ill, right after school. But the teacher insists that everyone stay after class because some children have spoken and interrupted the lesson. If the girl leaves to comfort her friend she has violated a school norm about obeying teachers, but has honored a moral obligation to a friend.

Moral philosophers tell us that moral rules are over-riding, that they are not equivalent with other values and norms, but instead trump them. It does not take an industrial-strength moral theory to understand this point; even young children mark these distinctions and rank moral rules higher than other norms and values, as the psychologists Eliot Turiel and Larry Nucci have demonstrated. Even morally insensitive children know there is a big difference between the wrongs involved in talking to your best friend during a lesson, and lying to your best friend.

Moral rules are over-riding just because *other* norms and values *are* frequently in conflict. A and B both value the same land or sexual partner. Such values can become very important to both of them; they may take strong steps to have their way. This is Hobbes's problem. If a society had no authoritative way of settling such conflicts, life would soon become solitary, nasty, brutish, and short. Strong evolutionary pressures are imposed on any group, whether traditional or modern, to maintain some basic cohesion and harmony, to assure social efficiency and boundary protection. Those norms which maintain the basic social fabric over-ride other claims.

If the moral rules conflicted as readily with one another as other norms and values do, they could not serve this over-riding, conflict resolving role. Shweder appears to recognize this when he accepts that there are "terminal goods" such as harm reduction, and norms we accept as though they were "revealed truths." This appears to allow him to allocate at least some small but essential number of cases to the "moral certainty" category. But he takes this back when he states that though there are universally binding objective moral values, there are just too many of them. For this implies for him that just about all interesting cases remain indeterminate. So here his use of Berlin's theory leaves us without any approach to Hobbes's problem.

Let us return to moral rules in the context of cultural difference and see if we can do better than this. Each culture, depending on many contingencies of its eco-niche, and its history of normative inventiveness, will specify such norms differently. Codes governing property, or sexual relations, or violence, will vary. Moral rules stated as philosophical abstractions will of course be insufficient to settle conflicts which arise when groups are initially brought into contact. Much thick description will be necessary to understand whether, and how, such rules might be applied in a manner sensitive to the understandings of the different groups. Granted this much, it hardly follows from this, as Shweder at some points suggests, that they will be no more than empty tautologies. It is no accident that property, sexual relations and violence so frequently show up as matters to be regulated by over-riding norms; all humans seek to protect their lives and limbs, their means of survival and genetic reproduction.

Hobbes's solution is to insist that a state be granted sufficient power to coerce agreement over at least the minimal requirements of social life. This insight accounts for the very close relation between moral rules and the criminal law. But frequently mere moral coercion is sufficient, and we are wise in not bringing matters that are not absolutely essential to social life under the criminal law. For example, we are wise in refraining from criminalizing adultery but applying strong moral sanctions against it. In the inter-cultural and international cases to which Shweder calls our attention, what we seek is some more all-embracing global equivalent for local rules and legal arrangements which apply in single culture situations.

Moral Progress: Theoretical or Practical?

Shweder makes the problem of moral progress too much a theoretical matter, a topic in the metaphysics of morals. I think we would be better off starting where the problem arises in practice. Throughout human history, peoples have drawn distinctions between insiders and outsiders, members of the cultural group and others. And again there are strong evolutionary pressures behind this distinction, due to competition for food and reproduction. Harmony within the group has been a strategic necessity; harmony with outsiders has been at best a tactical ploy. It was only in such cosmopolitan urban societies of Greece and Rome that Stoic and Christian ideals of the brotherhood of humanity could even arise, because only in such societies were peoples from many different groups living interdependent lives. Only in such situations did "in" and "out" inter-penetrate. The adage "live and let live" — the ideal of recognition of difference at a distance, could no longer suffice.

The question of truly universal moral rules only arises as a serious practical matter when Hobbes's problem confronts the entire human community. Globalization has brought this to a head. The compression of time and space puts us all within one another's reach, and increasingly different peoples live amongst one another. Hobbes's problem now applies on a planetary scale. Multiple sets of local insider rules can no longer keep the peace. Now we really do need a universal morality, composed of a small number of shared transcultural moral rules, regulating the relations between nation states and between multi-ethnic members of each cosmopolitan metropolis. And in parallel with a culturally sensitive and adaptive criminal

law, we need trans-national agencies with coercive power sufficient to give this universal morality teeth.

The problem of moral progress consists in working toward such moral understandings, and forging such inter-cultural and transnational agencies and institutions. Moral progress is the project of bringing about a situation where such overriding rules are understood and accepted by all, so that negotiation and diplomacy rather than violence can settle inevitable conflicts. Global civil society, and the global discourse of human rights which Shweder denigrates, are the existing instruments for this work. We may wish the instruments were better. We may admit that participants in the global discourse are hardly representative of humanity, that they are drawn overwhelmingly from western-influenced elites, that their work can be corrupted by special pleading and marred by moral self-certainty. But that said, these are our existing tools for the necessary work of moral progress and they need our respect and support, including effective criticism and correction from their friends.

MORAL PROGRESS AND EDUCATION

This brings me at last to the relation between moral progress and education. One problem plaguing the global cities of today is how to bring young people together in a way that breeds empathy, mutual respect, and a yearning to resolve inter-group issues without violence, despite remaining differences. It goes without saying that we are not even bringing them together in today's urban schools. Suburbanization assures this. Parents with children move to the suburbs with the understandable (if somewhat deplorable) aim of maintaining family advantage, as well as the altogether admirable aim of avoiding situations of unregulated conflict and violence in today's urban schools.

Public education is now undergoing unprecedented strain. Charter schools, vouchers for religious education, home-schooling, cyber-schools and distance learning, corporate-sponsored technical academies in the high schools, are all eroding our received institutional understandings of what public education is and must be. This is having many negative effects, including an increase in stratification and racial and cultural re-segregation. But the resulting chaos in public education, along with the spread of the Internet, also opens new possibilities'— for forms of public education that cut across school district lines, that can bring young people together at least some of the time for convivial interactions and creative problem-solving. From such encounters inter-group frictions and opportunities for mutual understanding and a fusion of horizons may arise. The Internet, email, and facilitated discussion lists might keep communications channels open between face-to-face inter-group meetings.

Whether we choose to seize such new opportunities, the problem of moral progress will remain the practical challenge of bringing young people together across ethnic, class, and political boundaries, to facilitate fruitful, cooperative interactions that lay the groundwork for a thin, but universal, morality in a world of difference.