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PROJECT

Sociology of Morals

An enquiry into the conceptual history and current diversity of the meanings of "moral", leading to a study of how to investigate empirically the nature and extent of moral diversity.

Recommended Reading

Lukes, Steven M. Emile Durkheim, His Life and Work: a Historical and Critical Study. London: Penguin Books, 1973.

___ . Marxism and Morality. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.

___ . Moral Relativism. New York: Picador/Macmillan, 2008.

The Diversity of Morals

Talk of morality has hitherto mainly been the preserve of its academic guardians, namely philosophers, and its social guardians, namely priests and educators. But recently morality has become a hot topic of inquiry among psychologists, cognitive scientists, animal ethologists, biologists and even behavioral economists, but not yet anthropologists and sociologists. I shall view 'morality' naturalistically: that is, as a human phenomenon that results from biological and cultural processes and is subject to investigation by natural and social scientists. The coevolution of genes and cultures has resulted in core moral universals and diverse concrete moral practices. I want here to address a distinctively sociological question: how much moral diversity is there? I shall first show why this is an important question that is worth asking. I shall try to clarify the question and consider difficulties that beset attempts to answer it.

The question is important because so much of contemporary politics consists in responding to diversity, both geopolitically and domestically. The diversities in question are of various kinds—of custom and tradition, ethnic identity and religion. These shape the norms that people accept as binding. I shall take morality to encompass these norms and claim that it is when they diverge that acute political problems can arise.

What, then, is moral diversity? Charles Darwin, who was the first to offer a plausible genealogy of morals 'from the side of natural history,' wrote that 'of all the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important...it is summed up in that short but imperious word ought, so full of high significance.' It is captured by Kant's idea of duty and by Adam Smith's 'impartial spectator' (the 'man in the breast'), giving 'normative guidance' to our moral sentiments by indicating when to blame oneself and others and when it is appropriate to feel sympathy, anger, indignation, gratitude, resentment, regret, remorse, guilt, shame, disgust and so on. It appears that this moral sense and some range of these moral sentiments are universal across all cultures but they are realized in vastly different ways; and the scope of moral concern is similarly variable, ranging from the tribe to the entire human race plus 'the lower animals.' Some ('moral realists' or 'cognitivists'), while aware of this variation, nevertheless think that there is one single true morality: they argue that, if there were agreement on all the nonmoral issues (including theological ones), there would be no more moral disagreement. Others ('non-cognitivists') find this implausible. What bearing does the evidence from history and the social sciences have on this debate?

Among the difficulties facing the investigation of this question, three are worth discussing: how to avoid reifying cultures; how to describe the conduct over which there is moral disagreement when the parties themselves disagree over what is going on; and how to distinguish genuine or 'fundamental' moral disagreements from disagreements over the non-moral facts.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Lukes, Steven M. (London,1992/1982)

The rules of sociological method : and selected texts on sociology and its method

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Lukes, Steven M. (London [u.a.],2009)

The curious enlightenment of Professor Caritat : a comedy of ideas

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Lukes, Steven M. (Basingstoke [u.a.],2005)

Power : a radical view ; [the original text with two major new chapters]

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Lukes, Steven M. (Oxford,1991)

Moral conflict and politics

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