Morality, values and culture

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Cultures are "moral orders".

In every human group there is a set of mores, or collectively shared practices or local ways of behaving not directly ruled by biological processes. Practices are evaluated not only as effective or ineffective, but also as good or evil, desirable or forbidden.

Some among those practices become values, that is not simply necessary and self evident routines, but sacred forms of relating with others and with the natural and supernatural world; violations to them raise sanctions by the group and feelings of anxiety and guilt in individuals.

The cultural sets of practices and values are structured at a basic level by some deep premises (Shweder, 2003), or visions of how the world is and of what it is to be human, of what is true, good, and worth living. These are experienced as both cognitive judgments and as aesthetic and emotive reactions; then they strongly motivate actions because are supported by strong convictions and powerful feelings. They usually remain unreflected upon and unexplored, but, if contested or attacked, manifest their roots in some deep layer of individual and collective identity, or value system, through defensive and aggressive reactions (Noam, 1993; Staub, 1993).

Value systems have not been worldwide convergent along history. Analysing past history and current cultures all around the world, we must conclude that "Ideas about human experience that persist for a long time, are widespread, or become invested with social meaning and established as folk theories in a major region of the world are not likely to be merely primitive or superstitious. Such ideas illuminate some aspects of mind, experience, or society and can be put to use not only to construct a valid cultural psychology but to extend our moral imagination" (Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, 2003, p. 75).

There is no reason why we must select one and only one discourse to represent an area of experience. Indeed, there may be some advantage in possessing multiple discourses for covering the complexities of such an important area of human experience as ethics ((Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, 2003, p.100)

Three kinds of ethics On a worldwide scale, we can see three great kinds of ethics:

- The ethics of autonomy aims to protect the zone of discretionary choice of individuals and to promote the exercise of individual will in the pursuit of personal preferences. Autonomy is usually the official ethic of societies in which individualism is an ideal.

- The ethics of community, in contrast, aims to protect the moral integrity of the various stations or roles that constitute a society or a community, where a "society" or a "community" is conceived of as a corporate entity with an identity, standing, history and reputation of its own.

- Finally, the ethics of divinity aims to protect the soul, the spirit, the spiritual aspects of the human agent and nature from degradation" (Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, 2003, p. 99).

These deep roots of central values are or located on a hierarchical structure between one another. Being ultimate, as the philosopher Isaiah Berlin argues, they are not commensurable, and can conflict with one another. Studies by Shweder (1991), Turiel (2002), and many others, demonstrate that consensus and dissent are widespread not only between cultures, but also between groups inside the same culture, and between individuals inside the same group. Neither consensus and compliance, nor dissent and opposition, are good or bad per se.

Hanna Arendt concluded her analysis on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, who

was prosecuted in Jerusalem in 1961 for war crimes, stating that: "He did his duty, as he told the police and the court over and over again; he not only obeyed orders, he also obeyed the law" (1963, p. 135). Experiments done by Asch (1952) Milgram (1963), on conformity, obedience to authority, and bystander intervention, as well as a lot of anecdotal observation like those collected by Turiel even in more authoritarian societies than our western ones, show that the application of moral rules varies by situational contexts and by people's judgments of concrete social events. People weigh and balance different considerations of a moral, social, and personal kind.

Besides, cultural practices are many-sided, so that people in different positions on the social hierarchy can benefit or be damaged by those practices. Then, practices and rules not only diverge among societies, but also are never totally shared within the same society. Moral orders too are continually and inevitably exposed to the possible gap between the ways reality is directly given to experience and the ways it is institutionally defined.

As a consequence – Turiel concludes – "Clearly, conflicts, disagreements, contested understandings, and critiques of norms regulating hierarchical relationships are evident in many cultural settings" (p. 283). In a similar vein, according with evidence collected by cultural psychologists, Shweder (2003) invites to "reject radical relativism and to engage in informed cultural critique, but only after we have achieved a non-ethnocentric conception of the moral domain and some knowledge of local ethnographic realities" (p. 5).

The "view from manywhere" that can derive from this principle seems more fruitful, as it supports co-constructive – instead of other-defeating – relations in intercultural encounters. Indeed, it does not mean a view from anywhere in which 'anything goes', but a view in which, before arriving to comprehend the other's point of view (from the Latin comprehendere: to have in one's hands), and judge it, we consider it to be worth a second look: in the end, the Latin word respicere, which respect comes from, means just to look at something once more.

Any universalistic, final and absolute perspective, though deeply rooted in the human need for certainty, does not escape the risk of opening the way to fanaticism or at least to the unconscious defence of the status quo, the 'already instituted' as the unique and unquestionable "view from nowhere".

The human condition seems to have no way out between the defensive return to one's own certainties which so often produces domination and destruction, and the willingness to work together through and about everyone's differences. "We are condemned to either ignoring and annihilating differences, or to working tenuously across them to form always risky bonds of understanding" (Narayan, 1988, p.34).