WESTERMARCK, MORAL BEHAVIOUR AND ETHICAL RELATIVITY

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Edward Westermarck is known but scantily in the modern anthropological consciousness. His name appears, if it does at all, usually in a passing comment or perhaps a footnote, often rather disparagingly.[2] This, I would argue is quite wrong, all the more so as he fits in precisely with the topic of our conference. He is, I would say, an unheralded bridge between the Scottish Enlightenment and modern anthropology, a person whose work far from being played out, deserves to be at the absolute centre of our understanding of the development of our discipline.[3]

Who then, was this Westermarck? He was, in brief, a brilliant Swedish-speaking Finnish anthropologist and philosopher who, having fallen out with the German thinkers, decided rather that he preferred the British. Already when a young man, he made trips to Britain, to the British Library, and his doctoral thesis drew heavily on his researches there. Expanded, it appeared in English as *History of Human Marriage* in 1891. In it, there are found two arguments which resonate still today; that there has never been a human society in which regular bonds have not formed between partners, and proximity in childhood inhibits mating: that is, he claims to have solved the 'incest taboo'. The first was absolutely essential to the creation of kinship studies as we know them, because it removed the necessity to view human society as having passed through a series of historical stages, from promiscuity to marriage. The second, his explanation of the incest taboo, is more controversial but there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that he may be correct, as has been argued consistently for example by Arthur P Wolf.[4]

Not just brilliant but hard-working and cordial, Westermarck obtained university positions quickly in Finland, but he wished to pursue fieldwork, arriving ultimately in Morocco, where he stayed for part of the year, aided in doing so by the purchase of the Swedish

consul's house in Tangier. He was active too, in the Independence movement, beginning even whilst still busy with fieldwork to travel to England to help create a petition to the Czar to withdraw Russian influence over Finland.[5] His fieldwork is sometimes regarded as being not very useful, because it is written in effect as a regional study rather than one focussed in a single community, as was to become fashionable even during his lifetime.[6] This I believe is quite wrong: it is quite true that the level of abstraction is greater than we are used to dealing with today, but the collected essays in *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (1926) are remarkable. They give an insight into the dense religious context of life in North Africa that is unparalleled until Bourdieu, and to my mind anticipated him and even, perhaps influenced him in his conception of *habitus*.[7] It is also interesting. - even if not directly relevant to my arguments here - that he always fully acknowledged the support he received from his closest informant, taking him with him back to Europe, and naming him as a contributor in his published work.[8]

He was equally successful in creating a social base in London. He became a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, receiving its Rivers Medal, and eventually the Huxley Medal, its highest honour.[9] Sponsored by Martin White, who believed that MPs should know something of Sociology, he began lecturing at the LSE, eventually in 1906 being awarded the Martin White Chair. He stayed at the LSE for thirty years, dividing up his time however between the LSE, Morocco, and Abo, in the north of Finland, where he was invited to become Rector of a new private, Swedish-speaking university.

At the LSE, he became Malinowski's teacher and then friend, then colleague. Indeed, I have slowly come to realise the enormous influence that Westermarck had on Malinowski. Though this is not the subject of my talk today, I am clear that the topics taught and discussed by Westermarck, such as the analysis of social institutions or the relationship between the social and the biological basis of behaviour, later were to become fundamental to Malinowski's vision. It is also the case that Westermarck was teaching at the same time as Malinowski, so that rather than conceiving that crucial moment at the LSE as the 'Malinowski' seminar, we should rather say the 'Anthropology Seminars', for the students at the time would go to both Malinowski's and Westermarck's seminars. Nor is it the case that Westermarck was a dry teacher, or distant figure. All contemporary reports, whether of his

teaching at Abo, or his seminars at the LSE say that he was as charming as he was stimulating.[10]

As if this was not enough to lead us to reassess Westermarck and his place in the emergence of social anthropology, he also wrote three major works on ethics and morals. These were; *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas* (1906-08); *Ethical Relativity* (1932), and *Christianity and Morals* (1939). In them, he both attacks vigorously those whom he believes are seeking a spurious moral universalism, and puts forward his own theory for moral relativism.

The ethnographic material for such a claim is laid out in the two substantial volumes of *Origins*. Drawing both on his fieldwork in Morocco, and on very extensive library researches, he divides the different aspects of human life that may lead to ethical conjectures into chapters; so that there are descriptions of suicide, marriage, celibacy, adultery, homosexuality, cannibalism, property, homicide, human sacrifice, slavery, and so on. His survey takes him into the immediate conclusion that there is no universally accepted ethical principle. How in turn then, do we explain the diversity of ethics and morals?

Westermarck's explanation is that moral behaviour is rooted in emotions which he refers to as 'retributive'. By this, he means that emotional reactions to a given situation may become retributive when they result in an identification with another person's actions, whether positively or negatively. In this work,

> (T)he theory was laid down that the moral concepts, which form the predicates of moral judgements, are ultimately based on moral emotions, that they are essentially generalisations of tendencies in certain phenomena to call forth either indignation or approval...We found that the moral emotions belong to a wider class of emotions, which may be described as retributive; that moral disapproval is a kind of resentment, akin to anger, and that moral approval is a kind of retributive kindly emotion, akin to gratitude.[11]

We should note that though the emotional reaction is experienced subjectively it is at the same time collective, shaped by the institutions of society. Ethical behaviour can therefore only be understood in terms of an interaction between society and the individual, and can only be induced if an individual has the capacity to feel empathy or sympathy

for their interlocutor. For Westermarck, in becoming moral, it does not just draw on collective understandings, but assumes an almost disinterested quality, so that the ethical judgement becomes a reflection upon the interaction independently of the individual concerned:

> Society is the birthplace of the moral consciousness...Public indignation is the prototype of moral disapproval, and public approval the prototype of moral approbation. And these public emotions are characterised by generality, individual disinterestedness and apparent impartiality. Thus moral disapproval is at the bottom of the concepts bad, vice, and wrong; whilst moral approval has led to the concepts good, virtue and merit.[12]

Westermarck's clear style, detailed examples, and readiness to enter into detailed disputation with other philosophers whom he believed were not seeing the problems with sufficient clarity, led him to be widely reviewed, both by academic colleagues such as Hobhouse or Marett who wrote the review in *Mind*, but also in the press as well, such *Nature*, the *Athenaeum*, *Scotsman*, and *Yorkshire Post*.[13] It then appears to have fallen largely from view until taken up from philosophy by Timothy Stroup many decades later, who has written a detailed analysis of his thought, and stimulated a parallel collection of essays, both published in 1982. Things then appear to go quiet again, though there is further interest today from a group of young Finnish scholars writing in English, and it is likely that he will become more prominent in the next decade.[14]

Westermarck himself cites a myriad of sources for his work, both ethnographic and philosophical. For Stroup, however, the principle influences can be reduced to four: David Hume, Adam Smith, Frazer, and Darwin.[15] From Hume, Westermarck borrowed the crucial insight that at the heart of morals lies an emotional reaction. Westermarck is even more enthusiastic concerning Adam Smith, of whom he writes:

> I maintain that Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments is the most important contribution to moral psychology made by any British thinker, and that it is so in the first place on account of the

> emphasis it lays on the retributive character of the moral emotions.[16]

Indeed, the opening lines of Smith's *Theory* show immediately just how much Westermarck has drawn from him:

> How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion we feel for the misery of others...The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society is not altogether without it.[17]

In the way that he sets his wider arguments, Westermarck is sometimes dismissed as a typical evolutionist.[18] It is true that the influence of Darwin is very strong, and has to be taken account in order to appreciate fully the approach that he is taking. The quality of empathy is, for Westermarck innate, something that is potentially part of the biological make up of Homo sapiens. In turn, he assumes that there is an evolutionary advantage to human groups which are able to make that identification with each other, for it is equally essential to co-operation as a group or as a family. The question, in turn, as to why this empathic quality should be present in human beings is not one that he feels is troubling to his argument. Given we have this capacity to socialise and to identify mutually with one another at all, he feels that he has demonstrated its importance to moral behaviour. Stroup offers the following summary, which I think can hardly be bettered:

> As a result of our likes and dislikes, together with our propensity to sympathise (which has altruistic overtones) and the beliefs we have about matters of fact, we approve or disapprove of certain intentions in others and in ourselves, and this, when contemplated from a disinterested, impartial and general viewpoint, causes us to apply predicates of moral approval or disapproval to the agent who has the intentions.[19]

If the roots of Westermarck's thoughts are clear, what of his present eclipse? That he is ignored, and I think unjustly, there is little doubt. That is not to say that he is not occasionally mentioned. He is. However, he does not inhabit that central position that he deserves in our understanding. Excluding him from the canonical understanding of important anthropological thinkers means in turn, that he is not taken into account in the recent literature on anthropology and morals. For example, we may take the otherwise fascinating volume edited by Monica Heintz, which appeared first in 2009. Nearly all its respective, and distinguished, authors state variously that the study of anthropology and morality is new. Rather than set the anthropological study of morality into its Enlightenment context, to which Westermarck clearly belongs, they assume that is in some way linked to the emergence of post-modernism reflexivity, and only a few decades old. Heintz, for example, in her introduction writes 'Can we preserve in our writings the dignity of other cultures even though we may perhaps - as individuals - disapprove of their values? These delicate questions lurk in postmodernist debates.'[20] Having made that assumption, almost every chapter regards the history of such anthropological enquiries as having a different starting point: almost invariably recent.

Why should this historical myopia be so acute? It appears to me to be dependent largely on the way that the editors, and the authors, approach the question of why they have become drawn to the study of morality. For Westermarck, relativism of morals is a factual matter that can be discerned through research and explained in ways that he would call scientific. Thus, for him the truth is simply that there is, in the world, no one moral way of doing things, and any universalist proposition, such as those put forward by Spencer or Mills, is not tenable for the reason that it is contradicted by the available facts which he, Westermarck, has marshalled. Thus, the relativism of Westermarck and the relativism of post-modernism apparently derive from quite different starting points: the one dependent on a single truth, the other denying its possibility.[21] It is hardly likely then, that those who regard relativity as emerging from a post-modern uncertainty with the existential status of reality should take as their starting point a text which appears at least to have a form of evolutionary positivism as its inspirational framework.

Even if this is the case, it leaves us with a further problem. It doesn't explain a rather long gap: Westermarck's work appeared in 1906, it appears to have fallen out of favour long before the emergence of post-modernism. Here, there the possibility of some assistance, however from the well-known Malinowski lecture by Laidlaw entitled 'For an anthropology of ethics and freedom'. His starting point, it will be recalled, is that the influence of Durkheim inhibited the appreciation of the individual: "Durkheim's conception of the social so completely identifies the collective with the good that an independent understanding of ethics appears neither necessary nor possible."[22]

From the point of view of the chronology of the disappearance of Westermarck, this certainly fits: he appears to have fallen out of favour with the emergence of structural-functionalism, which already in his Huxley Lecture in 1936 he regards with some distaste as the 'new anthropology'.[23] It is also absolutely the case that Westermarck himself regarded Durkheim as being in certain respects incompatible with his theory. However, there is perhaps a further underlying reason for the rapid eclipse. By the time that Durkheim has been incorporated into British social anthropology through Radcliffe-Brown, anthropology itself had shifted position so that it regarded itself as practicing a form of induction.[24] This, with its easy assumption of access to external reality makes it appear sharply contrasting to the later sophistication of post-modernism. Westermarck has been tarred, repeatedly, with the same brush.

Yet, Westermarck is not quite as straight-forward as this. Though he certainly believes that there is a reality, and that there can be such a thing as rational thought, in fact his approach to social life is constructivist.[25] This, combined with his readiness to offer clear, succinct hypotheses that are amenable to falsification means that he is in fact very close to a form of Popperian deductivism before his time. Not just this. Westermarck's exploration of morals and individuality contains at the same time a social prescription. He believes, just as Popper in the *Open Society*, that through understanding the social basis of ethics and morals, it is possible for the thinking - or the rational actor - to escape society's coils. How we are in practice to achieve that separation from the social life that has in the first place constituted our own ethical understanding he does not make clear, but he believes that it is possible. In other words, for Westermarck his moral enquiry is

ultimately about individual freedom: the way that the individual actor can escape the moral pressures that society imposes upon them through rational reflection.

Conclusions

In this paper, I argue several connected points. I suggest, at its simplest level, that we need to talk not about the Malinowski seminar but the anthropology seminars at the LSE. Only then can we gain a nuanced understanding of the multi-stranded way that modern anthropology was formed. I suggest further that there is more than one kind of relativism, or rather that relativism can emerge from different philosophical positions, and that we need to take this into account when we look at the history of our discipline's approach to anthropology and morals.

Westermarck, in his readiness to look back at the great moral thinkers of the Enlightenment, whilst at the same time being a pioneering anthropologist, acts as a bridge between the two streams of thought in major, scintillating works which repay as careful study today as they did at the time that they were written. It is fitting that at this decennial conference, which precisely attempts to draw a juxtaposition of these two themes, that we should celebrate his name, and I thank you for giving me the opportunity of doing so.

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Footnotes

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[2] Of many possible instances, see Kroeber's disapprobatory comments in his *History of Ethnological Theory* "With Westermarck the reader has the uncomfortable feeling that nothing interests him less than to comprehend primitive tribes…Sweeping generalizations of his, chosen here and there, will illustrate his ethnographic inadequacy…." (1937: 97). More recently, see the comments by Barth 'Neither [ie. Westermarck and Seligman] was theoretically innovative; only Malinowski represented the new anthropology'. Barth (2005: 20). As an exception to this, we may note Douglas (1998), which contains a very interesting discussion of Westermarck's position on ethical relativity.
[3] For introductory works: Westermarck's place in anthropology, Stroup (ed) 1982a; Shankland (ed) 2014, esp. Intro. For his place in philosophy see Stroup (1982b). For his life, and place in Finnish intellectual thought, see as well as the aforementioned the recent work by Lagerspetz, Suolinna, and Bruun (2014).
[4] For a recent statement, see Wolf (2014).
[5] This was published as *Pro Finlandia* (1899). See also Laperspetz (2014), and Lagerspetz, Suolinna, and Bruun (2014).
[6] See for instance, Gellner (1995: 235-6) or Handler (1985; 684).
[7] Bourdieu (1977).
[8] For instance, his *Wit and Wisdom in Morocco A Study of Native Proverbs* (1930) was published as being by Edward Westermarck "with the assistance of Shereef 'Abd-es- SalamEl-Baqqali".
[9] Westermarck (1936).
[10] This point is discussed in a little more detail in Shankland (2014: intro). See also Young's discussion of Westermarck's influence on Malinowski (2004); Montague's recollection of the seminars (1982), and Malinowski's own comment on Westermarck (1913: 34). Yet again, we may note that he was active in anthropological debates in London for nearly three decades, giving a paper for example at the large Anthropological Congress organized by Myres in 1934 [Myres 1934: 269]. His paper to its Section F 'Survival in Ritual' is reproduced in Shankland (2014: 169-177).
[11] (Westermarck 1906-08: 738).
[12] Westermarck (1906-8: 740).
[13] Extracts from such reviews are frequently quoted from as a form of advertising within Westermarck's publications, for example see the double-sided advert 'By the same author', following page 422 of Westermarck's *Marriage Ceremonies in Morocco* (1914).
[14] See Lagerspetz, Suolinna, and Bruun (2014), as well as the relevant chapters in Shankland (ed. 2014).

[15] Stroup (1982b: 126-127). See also Stroup (1984).
[16] Westermarck (1932: 71).
[17] Smith (1759: 1).
[18] Eg. Handler (1985; 684).
[19] Stroup 1982a: 186.
[20] Heinz (2009:).
[21] On this point, see the essays in Gellner (1985).
[22] Laidlaw (2002: 312).
[23] Westermarck (1936: 248).
[24] There are many ways to demonstrate this: for example it is the position which Evans-Pritchard attacks in his famous 'Social Anthropology past and present' (1950).
[25] On this aspect, see the comments on Westermarck and Hume in Douglas' 'How institutions think', (1998: 57-76).