# WHO ARE WE TO JUDGE?
# THREE PERSPECTIVES ON MORALITY AND THE ABSURDITY OF THEIR COEXISTENCE

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We can differentiate between three perspectives on moral issues: the first is prescriptive, the second descriptive and the third ascriptive. In prescriptive perspective, morality is a matter of how human beings *ought* to act. It is normative, which means that it defines what is to be condemned and what to condone. Using a descriptive perspective, anthropologists and historians record what moral views people currently hold and what views they held in the past. The descriptive perspective is inherently comparative. The ascriptive perspective was once concerned with whether or not an individual was of virtuous nature. Nowadays, moral psychology, the neuroscience of morality and evolutionary biology try to map, and hence ascribe, the organic and evolutionary origins of moral intuitions. The ascriptive perspective, then, could be considered materialist.

The three perspectives focus on different aspects of morality: the prescriptive perspective on norms, the descriptive perspective on practices and the ascriptive perspective on biological causes. In common usage, the perspectives are rarely kept apart. Confucius, for example, prescribes the supreme virtue of filial piety by describing how people behave, hence using a descriptive perspective to fashion a prescriptive one. The relevant passage in the *Analects* (13.18) reads as follows: 'The Lord of Yè instructed Confucius, saying, 'There is an upright man in my district. His father stole a sheep, and he testified against him'. Confucius said, 'The upright men in my district are different. Fathers cover up for their sons and sons cover up for their fathers. Uprightness lies therein'.' By describing how the men of his district behave, Confucius wants to educate the Lord of Yè on how people *should* behave.

We all know that moral admonitions often are couched in the language of actual behaviour, as when people say, 'because this is how

we do it' or 'this is what we have always done'. Given this insight, it is surprising that the habit of mistaking description for prescription, and vice versa, could give rise to concepts and theories of integrated, homogeneous sociocultural systems and moral communities in anthropology. For decades, anthropologists confused normative statements about morality with native descriptions of actual social practices. Jomo Kenyatta's thesis can serve as an example.

*The illusion of moral communities*

Kenyatta, personal student of Bronisław Malinowski and future prime minister of Kenya, wrote his thesis in the 1930s. The thesis, subsequently published as *Facing Mount Kenya: the tribal life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938), was filled with moral tales of 'tribal customs', the most notorious of which was the custom of cutting off the visible part of the clitoris; a practice known as clitoridectomy. What did Kenyatta mean when he referred to this practice as custom? That 'custom is lord of all' ('νόμος ὁ πάντων βασιλεύς'), as the ancient Greek poet Pindar (fragment 169a) put it? But if custom indeed were the lord of all, morality would serve no purpose. Moral norms are needed because custom is *not* lord of all. When Kenyatta made a case for the moral benefits and key function in Kikuyu society and culture of clitoridectomy, he defended the custom against attacks not just from 'a number of influential European agencies—missionary, sentimental pro-African, government, educational and medical authorities' (Kenyatta 1938: 125), who demanded the immediate suspension of the practice, but also from fellow Kikuyu who, according to Kenyatta, were detribalised because they had been 'away from home for some years' and now thought fit 'to denounce the custom and to marry uncircumcised girls, especially from coastal tribes' (ibid: 127). These were bold words coming from a man who had himself been accused of detribalisation because of his Western education, his many years in Europe, his amorous affairs with European women, his Leninist publications etc.

But resistance to clitoridectomy did not just come from European agencies like the Church of Scotland Mission and from Kikuyu critics; it also came from girls about to be cut. Kenyatta tried his best to mask

this fact. He wrote that the girl, who sits with her legs wide open while she is being cut, 'is not supposed to show any fear or make any audible sign of emotion or even to blink.' (ibid: 140). The keywords here are 'supposed to': the difference between morality and practice lies in these words. *Moral norms exist because people don't follow them.* If everyone always were to act in accordance with a moral norm, it would be neither moral nor norm; it would simply be human behaviour. The defining feature of moral norms is their violation.

Kenyatta narrates that girls who do not comply with the moral norm of suffering quietly during clitoridectomy are punished. To blink, wince or whimper 'would be considered cowardice (*kerogi*)' and make the girl 'the butt of ridicule among her companions' (ibid). If the natural reaction of each and every girl having her clitoris cut off were to remain unmoved and poised—if it were the equivalent of, say, squeezing a pimple—such social sanctions would be uncalled for. (Kenyatta added that an uncut Kikuyu girl could not get married. He himself married and had a child with a white British schoolteacher, who, one can assume, had an intact clitoris).

Presenting moral norms as social practice served both Kenyatta's political purpose of nationalism and Malinowski's functionalist cause.[2] What unites nationalism and functionalism is their reliance on models of homogeneous, integrated moral communities. Paying attention to and describing in detail trembling bodies and suppressed moans of agony shatters this illusion.[3]

## *Ascription and anthropology*

A descriptive perspective could be applied to the entire range of moral norms and practices. The historical and ethnographic record abounds with different moral norms: slaves should honour their master; wives should exhibit deference to their husbands; blasphemy should be punishable by death; same-sex couples should be allowed to marry each other; children should be able to explore their sexuality; etc. Observers of such a diversity of moral norms at times adopt the position of moral relativism, which extends the realisation that a particular view of right and wrong, good and bad, odious and virtuous is not shared by everyone—that, indeed, people might hold opposite

moral views on the same issue—to the conclusion that it is impossible to arrive at valid decisions in matters of morality.

Today, most human beings understand that not everyone on the planet shares their moral views. Yet, most human beings hold moral convictions and often their convictions are strong. Anthropologists are no exception. They might subscribe to moral relativism on rational grounds, yet are likely to react viscerally to certain moral infractions like, say, repeated child abuse and wife beating—at least if it occurs close to home. Robert Redford once wrote: 'It was easy to look with equal benevolence upon all sorts of value systems so long as the values were those of unimportant little people remote from our own concerns. But the equal benevolence is harder to maintain when one is asked to anthropologize the Nazis' (Redford 1953: 145). Today we know that it is possible to maintain, if not benevolence, at least methodological neutrality when studying Nazis, *génocidaires*, paedophiles and other nasty people. To avoid coming under suspicion of defending atrocious behaviour, anthropologists tell themselves and others that their relativism is methodological, not moral. This tale does nothing to solve the conundrum of us having double moral standards: one standard which we suspend to achieve methodological relativism and another which remains unsuspended. In the first case we adopt a detached view, in the second we are driven by our moral intuitions.

The disjunction between detachment and intuition makes sense in ascriptive perspective. Moral psychology, the neuroscience of morality and evolutionary biology hypothesise that human beings tend to react intuitively to suggestions and acts they find morally offensive. A preferred example in this context is that of how people react to what they perceive to be unfair treatment. Case studies, psychological experiments and the use of functional magnetic resonance imaging suggest that human beings with intact brains react negatively to unfairness.[4] This research also indicates that moral judgments issue from unconscious processes, not from conscious decision-making and that explanations for why an individual made a certain moral choice are rationalisations after the fact.[5]

In her comparative work, the anthropologist/political scientist Alison Dundes Renteln (2013: 71-114) suggests that a transcultural moral feature might be the notion of proportionality of retribution.

She acknowledges that what is considered to be a proportionate retribution varies—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth in one case, financial compensation and imprisonment in another. But what seems to be rejected universally is arbitrary and unfair forms of retribution. It is not surprising, then, that humanity's first written codes (that we know of) specify proportionate retributions for various infractions.

Do these hypotheses of moral instincts and intuitions tell us something about human nature? While many, if not most, people have more or less vague notions about human nature—man is born in sin; humans are wicked by nature; human beings come into the world as pure souls; etc.—they are easily dismissed by anthropologists because they do not hold up to the standards of empirical research. Scientific hypotheses, which ascribe moral intuitions such as an innate fairness instinct to human beings and thereby point into the direction of human nature, are more difficult to shrug off, however. At the same time, such hypotheses raise at least two questions: can human history's many elaborate normative systems of morality be deduced from a fairness instinct or some other innate faculty? And why does the supposed fairness instinct not inhibit unfair treatment; put differently: if everyone is equipped with the moral instinct for fairness, why is there a need for moral norms to ensure fair treatment in the first place? Without being able to address these questions at this point, they are mentioned here to caution against uncritically adopting the explanatory model provided by the ascriptive perspective in moral psychology, the neuroscience of morality and evolutionary biology.

*Conclusions*

Three perspectives on moral issues have been considered. The ascriptive perspective attributes a fairness instinct to human beings and seems to demonstrate that moral judgments are made in the shadows of the unconscious, not in the bright light of conscious, rational choice. The descriptive perspective registers moral diversity and lends itself to moral relativism. The prescriptive perspective generates norms and codes for morality and defines more or less clearly what constitutes their violation. In ascriptive and prescriptive perspective, morality tends to be viewed as a panhuman

phenomenon—either in terms of instincts or capacities common to all human beings or as norms and principles to which everyone ought to conform. Few anthropologists would object to the idea that human beings have a capacity for morality (as well as for moral transgressions). They might, however, disagree with the idea that there is such a thing as universal, unchanging moral principles. A properly devised comparative description of various moral norms and codes testifies to the fact of moral diversity. The descriptive perspective resembles what Thomas Nagel (1986) calls a 'view from nowhere', that is, a view which feigns a nebula's-eye view. This refers to the human capacity to see ourselves 'as arbitrary, idiosyncratic, highly specific occupants of the world, one of countless possible forms of life' (Nagel 1971: 725). Nagel elaborates: 'humans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand [...] the view is at once sobering and comical' (ibid: 720).

Albert Camus believed that this type of sobering and comical view originates in the collision between the human search for meaning and the silence and meaninglessness of the universe (a universe in which 'we find no vestige of a beginning,—no prospect of an end', to quote Edinburgh's own, James Hutton). The result of this collision, according to Camus, is absurdity. Nagel locates absurdity somewhere else: 'when we take this view and recognise what we do as arbitrary, it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity: not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded' (ibid).

We can apply this definition of absurdity to our own predicament as anthropologists: on one hand, we can adopt a detached view of the moral intuitions that drive us and other people; on the other, we do not cease to be the persons whose morality we so coolly regard. The absurdity of our condition lies in the fact that we both *are* and *are not* moral relativists. We are moral relativists as soon as we acknowledge the contingency of our moral intuitions and principles. The accident of our birth determined the range of moral choices available to us. At the same time, we are moral beings and cannot help being moral. So I find myself siding with Nagel when he writes that 'the human duality of

perspectives is too deep for us reasonably to hope to overcome it' (Nagel 1986: 185). Under these circumstances, finding anthropology's moral voice and vision—and here I part ways with Nagel's view on morality—is not a matter of moving beyond the human duality of perspectives by developing a political philosophy in syllogistic steps (if A and B, then C). It is an uneasy, dissatisfying acknowledgement of our absurd dilemma and its consequences, the most important of which is that we simply know too much to speak with fervour and devotion about morality. If anything, the moral voice in anthropology ought to sound like a mumbling stammer.

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*Footnotes*

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[2] See Berman 1996.
[33] Worse than Kenyatta's functionalist tale of clitoridectomy—which, after all, was written in the 1930s—are contemporary advocates of female genital amputation like Carla Obermeyer and Richard Shweder, who use aggregate statistical data to denounce opponents of the practice. The individual girl who is not 'brave' enough to undergo clitoridectomy—or is left traumatised by the procedure—is likely to be statistically insignificant from their point of view because (a) 'most' girls and women are in favour of continuing the custom and (b) aggregate data (if interpreted by Obermeyer and Shweder) indicate that the effects of clitoridectomy on the health and sexuality of women are not as bad as anti-female-genital-mutilation activists claim. For an analytically sophisticated critique of Obermeyer and Shweder, see Mackie 2003.
[4] A primary instrument for measuring people's reactions to unfair treatment is the Ultimatum Game: one player proposes how to divide a sum of money; the second player can accept or reject the offer; if she rejects the offer, neither player receives any money; if she accepts the offer the money is divided according to the first player's proposal. Second players tend to reject offers they consider too unfair, even if this means that they walk away empty-handed.
[5] See, e.g., Greene 2003, Haidt 2007, Haidt and Joseph 2004, and Hauser 2006. For a more comprehensive review of social decision-making in neuroscientific perspective, see Rilling and Sanfey 2013.