

Chapter 2

The Moral System

The ultimate goal of this monograph is to explain the emergence of human rights as homo sapiens' first truly indigenous global moral system. In order to do so we must first identify and describe the component of society most relevant to the discussion, and then explain how and why it evolves. This chapter describes the concept of the moral system, illustrating ways in which it is related to, but distinct from, the notion of religion. The notion of a moral system is used as a conceptual tool to assist in the analysis and understanding of rapid-paced changes in beliefs over time. Once defined, a theory of how moral systems change will be elucidated and propositions of the theory will be clarified. Subsequent chapters will apply the theory to traditional and modern societies respectively, in an effort to illustrate how moral systems evolve.

Secularizing Durkheim: Key Concepts

Durkheim (1912/1962) attempted to create a science of morality within Sociology that would objectively analyze and explain how it is that moral systems develop and function in societies at large. Early in his career, Durkheim had largely dismissed religion as a relic of traditional societies and predicted its eventual demise and replacement with a new norm he called the *cult of the individual*. Noting religion's durability, Durkheim returned to examine its function later in life. He defined it as, "...a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden-beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (1912/1962: 44). Durkheim rightly viewed religion as *sui generis*, but came to view its role in social integration as essential in many ways.

It is unfortunate in my mind that Durkheim returned to focus on religion as the basis of morality, as recent global trends in the rise of non-belief and the development of secular moral systems indicate that Durkheim's initial prognostication may have been prescient. While prejudice against non-believers abounds (Cragun et al. 2012), it is clear that they possess moral commitments in spite of their non-belief. If a definition of morality includes a sense of respect for others, it is clear that non-believers are moral human beings (Cragun 2013; Didyoung et al. 2013). Durkheim's preoccupation with religion, then, may have inhibited his efforts to develop a true science of morality.

Other research that makes use of religious terms, metaphors, rituals, and processes as *explanation* similarly obfuscates more than it clarifies. The study of religion is clearly a worthwhile endeavor in its own right. Yet *if* religion's primary function is embedded in something other than, or in addition to, a religious reality, inquiry is best served if the analytical concepts and terms used actually clarify rather than confuse or befuddle. At times it appears that religious terms are intentionally used to infer a greater religious reality than might otherwise exist. This includes the use of religious jargon or definitions used to refer to ubiquitous human qualities. The redefinition of humanistic values as "spirituality," is but one example of this slight-of-hand (Cragun and Kosmin 2013). It does more to artificially inflate the proportion of respondents identified as religious than it does to document genuine changes in values and the rise of new moral movements. When national and international data clearly show a persistent decrease in religious activity and an incumbent increase in people identifying themselves as having no religious affiliation or as atheist (PEW 2012a, b), describing the current religious climate as *post-secular* (Habermas 2008) seems disingenuous.

By shifting the focus from religion to morality, then, we can more clearly identify moral activity regardless of its religious or non-religious manifestations. To do this, I choose to "secularize" some of Durkheim's key concepts (Friesen 2013) by replacing terms normally associated with religion to something more benign. In particular, I wish to modify Durkheim's useful sacred/profane dichotomy. Drawing on the observations made by himself and his nephew Marcel Mauss in *Primitive Classification* (Durkheim and Mauss 1963), Durkheim argued in *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912/1962) that religions divide the world into two realms: the *sacred* and the *profane*. Components of the sacred involve those aspects normally associated with religion, while profane aspects of life are those which are outside the religious realm. Typically mundane aspects of life most often comprise elements of the profane, such as getting dressed or cleaning up after a meal. Profane activities and symbols are viewed neither as moral nor immoral; but *amoral*; having no religious significance.

Modifying these concepts to focus exclusively on morality and moral behavior is not difficult. As Hume (1739/1985) long ago noted, moralizing; the dividing of the world into favorable (good) and unfavorable (bad) elements, is a quintessential human behavior. People who come together to form a community likewise construct a *weltanschauung*, or world view. Moralizing is an essential feature of every *weltanschauung*. Certain aspects of existence are attributed *moral* meaning; either

good or bad. I'll call this the *moral realm*. The remainder of collective experience is part of what I will refer to as the *amoral realm*. Neither good nor bad, aspects of existence within the amoral realm are morally benign. A third potentially useful concept is what can be called the *nonmoral* realm. Aspects of life not yet encountered, that have yet to be cognitively processed by the community in order to designate it as part of the moral or amoral realm, would be part of the nonmoral realm. For example, a group of tribesmen first encountering members of another tribe heretofore unknown, may be uncertain as to how the new group's existence should be understood within the context of their shared *weltanschauung*. Members of the new tribe are not yet considered to be moral or amoral. Until an attribution is made, they remain part of the nonmoral realm.¹

Components of the moral realm are distinguishable from those in the amoral realm by measuring the reaction of a group member to any known artifact, behavior, or statement of belief. While Durkheim relied primarily on the observation of sanctions to reveal the sacred, the approach taken here is broader. Reactions to those components which are part of the moral realm will elicit either a positive or negative moral valuation. They may be received with a certain reverence or sense of awe, or elicit an aversive reaction which incites fear or revulsion. Amoral aspects may elicit emotive responses, such as laughter, pleasure, or even grief, but a morally evaluative aspect will be absent. Some variation in individual responses can be expected, but aggregated responses will reveal fundamental aspects of a group's moral system.

Durkheim observed that the proportion of life interpreted as *sacred* shrinks drastically as a society undergoes industrialization. Aspects of existence perceived as profane realize a corresponding increase during this process. This means that people in modern societies encounter more life experiences and artifacts devoid of religious meaning and perceive them as simply existing. Durkheim referred to this as the process of *secularization*. A similar trend can be described with the new terms defined above. While most every aspect of life is interpreted within the *moral realm* in traditional societies, people in modern societies perceive more parts of life as *amoral*. The result is a good deal less time spent deliberating about the moral meaning of issues and items in modern society. Human beings have much more individual freedom to choose to act according to their own desires, free from criticism, judgment, and negative sanctioning from others. This process might be termed *amoralization* for our purposes, though its close correspondence to the meaning of secularization should be clear. Amoralization may be a more useful term to tease out nuances in moral debates in modern societies as conflicts often involve two or more secular entities; neither of which may invoke a sense of sacred.

Though the proportion of life experiences interpreted within the moral realm generally decreases in modern societies, bitter disputes over what aspects of life *should* be ensconced within the moral realm continue, and may even increase.

¹ The concept of the nonmoral here is an application of Collins' (1992) concept of nonrationality.

Foucault (1990), for example, noted an explosion of discourse over sexuality in Victorian England at the same time that sexual behavior presumably decreased. Becker (1963) used the phrase *moral crusade* to characterize organized attempts to convince the general public that certain (amoral) aspects of life should be bedeviled, or interpreted as wrong or bad. Whether sincere or orchestrated, moral crusades in modern societies make heavy use of political and rhetorical devices in order to engender a moral consensus. Moral conflicts in modern society are not only a function of traditional versus modern values, but also have to do with increased competition over a decreasing moralized space and the professionalization of moral suasion. As we will see, successful solutions to moral conflicts are often realized in the increased abstraction of moral principles or ideals.

Having defined key concepts, we now turn to a description of the moral system.

The Bummer of Being Human

Theorists such as Arnold Gehlen, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Helmuth Plessner and others have challenged the *anthropocentric bias* in evolutionary theorizing. While most theorists begin with an attempt to explain humankind's 'obvious' natural superiority over other species, Gehlen's (1940) philosophical anthropology begins with the supposition that *homo sapiens* are a defective life form. Gehlen noted what he saw as intrinsic human deficiencies in comparison to other animals: organic primitivism (e.g. poorly developed jaw), lack of a coat or pelt to protect against the elements, the complete helplessness of a newborn, the painfully long period of dependency and maturation, and late sexual maturity. Combined with almost no natural instincts and what might be summarized as an inability to focus, Gehlen offers a theory of society-as-compensation for the inadequacies of human beings. Banding together for survival and developing institutions to direct actions, society offers humans the possibility of collective survival. Shared knowledge and cooperative economic activities help the species to transcend its innate vulnerabilities (in Honneth and Joas 1988).

Biologists like Alexander (1987) also suggest that society makes possible an aggregation helpful in obtaining common resources. Social cooperation facilitates information sharing, predator avoidance and defense, nepotistic investments in kin, and the hunting and killing of otherwise unattainable large prey. Turner (2006) draws on Gehlen's observations of human vulnerability to build his own theory of human rights. Because social institutions tend towards decay, Turner argues, human rights are needed as an ultimate mechanism of protection against vulnerability. While a discussion of human rights at this point is premature, suffice it to say that we too begin here with the observation of humankind's natural vulnerability, but expand beyond it.

Humans have reasons for creating society apart from their natural inferiority. Sociality and interdependency is now a part of our nature, a point demonstrated in Chap. 4. Humans seek the company of others because without it we are left

wanting. Loneliness can produce a host of psychological maladies. In addition to protection and connection, society offers *socialization*; a powerful force that unleashes personal potentials that are otherwise locked within a solitary individual. Studies of feral children raised in relative isolation or by wild animals procure evidence of just how emancipating is the process of socialization. Larger societies can create new dangers for human beings in the way of domination, exploitation, and mass death, but they also provide incredible opportunities for personal expression and self-growth simply unavailable in smaller societies. For thousands of years, people have been drawn to urban areas for economic and educational opportunities, art and music. In addition to the need for survival and sociality, then, society has the potential to meet the human needs of self-growth and personal expression. In many ways, the last 12,000 years of human society-building has been a history of deciding whose needs will be met first, most, and at what cost to others.

Nussbaum (2011) develops her capabilities approach by accepting a theory of society that acknowledges the human need for growth and development. Since the best of human achievement and enlightenment has been wrought collectively, Nussbaum suggests that each society needs to address the straightforward question: *what is each person actually able to do and be?* The success of a society, Nussbaum argues, *should* ultimately be measured by the extent to which each individual participant has been provided with opportunities for growth. Sen (2009) provides a similar approach, offering that personal and societal development is about more than opportunities: it is about justice. Though these authors move the dialogue from a descriptive analysis of what a society *is* to what it *should* be, their models presuppose a theory of society based on democratic human need fulfillment. Malinowski's (1948/1992) grounded observations of the Trobriand islanders elicited a similar conclusion.

By focusing on the *ought* question, Nussbaum and Sen also highlight a fundamental challenge faced by societies: how can individuals be motivated to connect with their social self and engage in prosocial behavior upon which society, and one's survival and growth, is ultimately dependent? In addition to the innate human needs for survival, sociality, and growth is a powerful tendency towards selfishness. Dawkins (1976/2006) subordinated all other human tendencies to the survival instinct in his successful book, *The Selfish Gene*. Enthusiastically received by biologists long criticized by the religious right, as well as those eager to find scientific justification for an economic system that produces inequality, Dawkins provided substantial evidence that the human tendency toward 'selfishness' is innate. Thirty years later, Dawkins ruminated as to whether he should have instead chosen the title *The Immortal Gene*, given that the word *selfish* is so laden with moral innuendo. His tome, nonetheless, resonated intuitively with a wide readership. We know our selfishness personally. Social living requires unselfish behaviors like turn-taking, sharing, and give-and-take. The human moral dilemma is thus choosing between our autonomous, but lonely, vulnerable, and incomplete self on the one hand, and our social, secure, connected, growing but interdependent self on the other. Because the autonomous, selfish self is a danger to the

integrity of society, human communities create rules and regularized patterns of interacting that prioritize the prosocial choices over that of selfish choices. The social apparatus developed to motivate prosocial behavior is called the *moral system*.

Societal members create a moral system to motivate members to engage in prosocial behavior inasmuch as it pertains to ingroup members. Seldom is this done intentionally, at least in traditional societies. Over time, stories emerge that explain the origins of the group; stories that infer a sense of collective purpose and destiny. They impart to individuals an identity and affirm the moral superiority of the group. They articulate for individuals a sense of purpose in relation to the group. These stories help to contextualize the rules of the moral code. Specifically, then, the moral system consists of the following components:

1. **A creation myth**, which explains both the origins of the physical universe inhabited by the social group and the social group itself.
2. **A metaphysic**, or explanation of the meaning of life and one's place in the universe.
3. **A moral code**, or list of behavioral expectations.

Taken together, the components of a moral system are self-reinforcing. They motivate members to engage in prosocial behavior by offering explanations as to why otherwise selfish individuals might engage in altruistic activities. Creation myths invoke a cosmological connection to the universe and infer a special status to the group. They confer a sense of inherent morality and destiny. The moral system provides a connection with other group members that is transcendent of time and space. It ultimately serves to promote social cohesion and the integration of societal members, all of which are needed for the long-term survival of the group.

All religions are examples of a moral system, but only some moral systems take the form of a religion. Though it is often claimed that all societies have some form of religion, the truth of the assertion depends very much on one's definition of religion. Many anthropologists reject the notion that animism is a legitimate form of religion. If true, explaining the existence of morality for the 190,000 years of human history in which animism was the dominant belief system becomes problematic. A focus on moral systems solves this problem, for moral systems are a true cultural universal in that they exist in every society.

The ethnomethodological observation that these constructions logically implode upon close scrutiny reveals the social nature of moral systems. They are meant to provide enough context to motivate individuals to transcend their selfishness and commit themselves to the social group. Searching for deeper meaning or philosophical truths in moral systems eventually leaves many an investigator wanting, with more unanswered questions than when they began. Though selfish, human beings desire connectedness. Cosmologies, metaphysics and moral codes need only be sufficiently cogent to provide an excuse for engaging in cooperative behavior. The true test of their integrity is not in logical acuity or even the empirical validity of presuppositions, but their long-term ability to integrate members into a cohesive whole.

Moral systems are closed. They apply only to members of the same tribe or group that share the same moral system. Members are provided an explanation of the group's origins and their role within it. Because other groups exist outside of the moral system in the nonmoral realm, the moral rules and behavioral prescriptions of the tribe do not apply. This can help explain the historically arbitrary nature of inter-group contact, which has ranged from genocide and enslavement to assimilation and full-fledged acceptance. Because moral systems often incorporate cosmologies and metaphysical claims rooted in immutable truth claims and axioms, they tend towards stasis. Change is often seen as a threat and is perceived to be immoral. Moral systems thus tend to encourage social conservatism. Because a group's survival depends on successful adaptation, members are generally loath to change practices and beliefs that have heretofore served them well. This is why the moniker *traditional society* is so well-earned. While reasonable, conservatism can inhibit the evolution of moral systems more adept at integrating diverse populations into a cohesive whole.

A Theory of Moral Change

Having described a moral system and related concepts, it is now possible to outline a theory of moral change. Social theorists have identified many catalysts of sociocultural evolution, including climatic changes, technological innovations, economic surpluses, ideological development, and more. Because a change in a moral system is largely adaptive, it almost always follows, rather than precedes, changes in other areas of society. This approach is congruent with Lenski's (2005) ecological-evolutionary approach, but seeks to further explicate the nature of moral change per se. This approach is also in-line with a *cultural materialist* orientation as developed by Harris (1979/2001). Sometimes described as "probabilistic infrastructural determinism" (a misnomer, since probabilistic accounts are not, by definition, deterministic), cultural materialism posits that in almost all circumstances it is the material infrastructure (e.g. environment, technology, demography) that forces adaptive cultural evolution. While most cultural materialists focus on cultural change as a whole, the focus here is specifically on moral paradigmatic shifts.

Though infrastructural elements like the environment certainly play a part in the formation of creation stories, we focus on an exposure to *human diversity* as a key instigator of moral change. Human diversity includes a variety of personalities, physical characteristics, cultural practices, dress, and rituals. It includes an array of diverse and conflicting belief systems, world views, and vocabularies used to describe such. Exposure to human diversity poses a fundamental challenge to moral systems by bringing nonmoral aspects of life into the realm of immediate experience. People are confronted with others who are different than they are, who exist outside their moral system, and believe and live in a manner different than they do. Prolonged exposure to human diversity can stimulate a collective process whereby individuals must come together, acknowledge the diversity, and render an account of it. The longer a group is exposed to human diversity, the greater the likelihood that the exposure will

precipitate a moral crisis. Prolonged exposure to human diversity ultimately taxes the credulity of a moral system. It forces a group to account for the existence of the diversity. As diverse individuals and groups become a part of society, moral codes must be developed to prescribe appropriate reactions to the diversity. If the moral prescriptions include the subordination or mistreatment of diverse groups, rebellion and protest against the moral system by the disenfranchised may be realized.

Successful moral adaptation occurs when moral systems are revised and replaced so as to account for the new reality and integrate new peoples in ways that helps reduce conflict, confusion, and resentment. Thus, the types of moral changes that are most successful over time are those that revise moral stories and principles with increasing abstraction, articulating sophisticated moral precepts that are more inclusive and universal and capable of integrating all members into a cohesive whole. Change in moral systems can at times occur relatively quickly, through social revolution. Conquerors often superimpose their moral system on the vanquished but, unless the diversity is extinguished through physical or cultural genocide, segregation, or assimilation, resentment and friction will be ongoing. Moral change is thus an adaptive mechanism used by social groups to enhance social cohesion and aid in the social integration of its members. Ultimately, more human needs are met in moral systems that better integrate the diversity within.

The primary manner in which societal members experience diversity is through population growth. Growth can be realized either internally or externally, but both facilitate exposure to human diversity. *Internal population growth* is realized when birth rates exceed death rates resulting in a net gain. Internal population growth is frequently the result of technological innovations which increase health and longevity. Internal population growth elicits greater diversity through a wider array of personalities, experiences, and behaviors. In large societies, social strata emerge in which the rights and privileges of some are denied to others. Subcultures and counter-cultures can emerge, which test the limits of moral tolerance and understanding.

External population growth occurs as a group comes into contact with populations different than their own. Historically, external population growth has occurred as a result of trade, conquest, and immigration. New populations are subsumed or amalgamated into political systems of increasing size, such as city-states, nations, and nation-states. Though increasing inequality and social stratification are often the result of population growth, questions of fairness and equality fare prominently in public discourse. Mechanisms of redistribution are often implemented, even in societies with great amounts of inequality. Real or symbolic, these mechanisms indicate an ongoing concern with inequality.

Having described the major components of a theory of moral systems, we are left with the following propositions:

Proposition 1 *Homo sapiens band together to increase their chances of survival and to meet human needs.*

Proposition 2 *A moral system; consisting of a creation myth, a metaphysic, and a moral code, serves to integrate societal members by creating cohesion among group members and motivating pro-social behavior.*

Proposition 3 *Because moral principles originate among groups separately, they may differ from group to group. At the point of initial intergroup contact, the moral principles may not be recognizable across groups, thus intergroup contact can, and frequently does, result in warfare, conflict, enslavement, and subjugation.*

Proposition 4 *Internal and external population growth places environmental stress on the credulity of moral systems as exposure to human diversity makes it increasingly difficult for the existing moral system to successfully integrate all members into society. Members of diverse subgroups may openly challenge their implied inferior moral status, resulting in a decline of social regulation and an increase in social conflict and discord.*

Proposition 5 *Prolonged and intense exposure to human diversity often provokes a moral crisis where support for and belief in the current moral system wanes and alternatives are either suggested or incorporated into daily life.*

Proposition 6 *Over time, successfully adaptive societies increase the chances of the long-term survival of its members by adapting more abstract and universal moral principles which better integrate diverse elements into a cohesive whole, thus achieving a better fit with the realities of their changing social environment.*

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