



Correspondence

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Arbitrary Values

Richard Shweder (December 1996 AN, p 1) and his collaborators continue to make an important contribution by calling our attention to the content of moral reasoning as a domain of inquiry. But I take issue with Shweder's latest essay on empirical grounds. Shweder criticizes D'Andrade for the latter's suggestion that moral truth is outside the realm of science. The foundation for this criticism is "the universal experience of moral judgments as cognitive judgments and not solely as aesthetic or emotive judgments." Apparently, if people everywhere experience some type of thing (the class of moral judgments) as self-evidently true, then some objective phenomenon must lie at the bottom of it all. I question this assumption. People everywhere experience it as self-evidently true that the visible spectrum is divided into distinct colors despite the seamless nature of changes in the wavelength of light. Yes, an objective phenomenon does lie at the bottom of it all, but it is one that explains away, rather than validates, our perceptions. Distinct "colors" are the product of the interaction of our visual physiology and our enculturated minds. Analogously, our

perceptions of what is moral, amoral and immoral are the product of the interaction of our culturally constituted models of reality and the metalessons we have learned through redundant life experiences. Like Alan Fiske, Shweder raises the additional possibility that human minds may be built to parse their social worlds in particular ways. If true, this would mean that, as in the case of color, the range of variation in moral systems is limited. But as Shweder himself demonstrates, this range is nevertheless sufficiently large that an understanding of panhuman psychic structures in no way helps us to choose between one moral system and another.

Psychocultural analyses of moral judgments both explain, and explain away, morality. Ultimately, despite their profound importance, fundamental moral values are arbitrary. Of course, from a systems perspective, only certain kinds of values will allow a given type of society (or species) to continue to exist, but this is an evolutionary question and is irrelevant to our personal choices. As Shweder correctly asserts, anthropological pluralism can diminish the determinative influences of our own socialization and enculturation, both by making us aware of the range of possibilities and by helping us to gain perspective on practices such as circumcision in our own culture. Indeed, this is one of the principal reasons for incorporating anthropology into curricula. But the choice of moral values nevertheless remains an intuitive one, regardless of how much Shweder would like the process to be rational. In the end, like Jefferson, each of us must be satisfied with holding certain truths to be self-evident. For my part, with regard to larger debates within the discipline and beyond, I ask only that individuals clearly indicate when the goal of their activities is the conversion of others to their moral views. Likewise, if the purpose of a cross-cultural enterprise is

activism, it ought to be labeled as such. Then again, honesty is itself an arbitrary value.

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Intellect without Morality?

I read with interest and disapproval Richard Shweder's comments (December 1996 AN, p 1) aligning the custom of entering a Jewish male child into the covenant of Abraham and the painful, crippling genital mutilation practiced by societies in which women are sexually and socially oppressed. Obviously, I feel this is an invidious comparison. But what concerns me even more is the position Shweder is trying to achieve as if above and apart from society. When one tries to attain a morally sterile perspective in the name of intellectual discovery, one may forfeit that which is distinctly human. If we become pure intellect without morality, compassion, ethics, or poetry, we might as well be replaced by artificial intelligence. Further, if we haven't learned from the Holocaust that moral isolation is as evil as the cruelty it witnesses then what good is our intelligence at all? To try to stand above morally reprehensible behavior is to be complicit to it. I will not be a voyeur to preventable tragedy. As a physician and as a religious person, I can only regard such nonjudgmental amorality as immorality.

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Old Man of the Mind?

Daniel Fessler recently suggested (December 1996 AN, p 7) that evolutionary

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