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Comments on Steven Lukes, *The Diversity of Morals*

Kieran Healy

Duke University

kieran.healy@duke.edu

The Diversity of Morals asks the questions philosophers ask about morality: what is “the moral”? How wide and deep is its diversity? Is there a standpoint from which we can make our judgments? It then refuses to answer them by philosophical methods alone. Instead, it draws on the resources of both social theory and the social sciences, from primatology and anthropology to sociology and political science, in an effort to construct a defensible answer. I do not think it quite succeeds. But I am also unsure of what success would look like.

Before any critique, let me state the argument as I understand it. I confess that I found it a little tricky to reconstruct because of the way the book lays things out. The text is dense with quotations, sometimes quite lengthy, and prefers to proceed by picking out representatives of the various positions investigated, letting us hear them speak, and maybe selecting some piece of their argument to be partially endorsed and carried forward. It reminded me of being in an expertly-taught graduate seminar where the participants are working their way through a wide literature. In a seminar we would be able to stop at many points to discuss each new contributor’s ideas, to make connections in an expanding web of ideas. But because this is a book, at times it was a little too much like a whistle-stop tour of other people’s views. I found myself wanting a clearer sense of the author’s own argument. To be fair, Lukes acknowledges early on that he does not always take sides, and that sometimes “such reluctance may be the appropriate way to recognize the sheer difficulty of reaching a convincing conclusion” (xii).¹

¹Page numbers with no further bibliographical reference are to Lukes (2025).

HUME, HERDER, AND SMITH

There is a positive line of argument, though. The book argues that the word “moral” names not a domain or perspective sitting alongside the legal, economic, or political, but the standpoint from which all such standpoints are judged. It’s the point of view from which we ask what the most serious, central things in life are. There is no “outside” to this standpoint. The unmaskers of morality, from Thrasymachus to Bernard Williams, are moralists in spite of themselves. The distinctively human capacity underlying it is “Smithian empathy”, that is, an effort to understand others embedded in a second-person point of view where we both demand and owe justification. This perspective-taking is not the Humean “contagion” that we share with other primates, but a kind of projection that triangulates what you would feel, what you should feel, and what an impartial “anyone” would feel (58-62; 71-3).

This Smithian empathy is used to overcome the broad contrast that the book starts out with. On the philosophical, or Humean, side is the intuition that there can be correct answers to moral questions, possibly grounded in the conviction that people are in the end all very much the same, perhaps thanks to some intrinsic human nature. On the social-scientific, or Herderian, side is the intuition that the sheer heterogeneity of moral beliefs and practices across societies makes a nonsense of efforts to derive and defend some general substantive morality. The best we can do is document its variety, and perhaps try to naturalistically explain its origins in particular cases.

This broad distinction, as the book itself makes clear, breaks down almost immediately. There are plenty of error-theorists and moral nihilists in philosophy. And in the social sciences, there is a lot of good empirical work on the most general aspects of “moral” social behavior, which generally means the emergence of generalized exchange, or altruism, or “pro-sociality”. A little more narrowly, and where many sociologists land, we have examinations of the character “moral” beliefs or actions, of “values” of all kinds and the practices or norms associated with them. These are all “social” morals, in the book’s terminology.

The Diversity of Morals agrees that the natural and social sciences can explain the emergence and persistence of morals in that second sense, but argues that they cannot naturalistically explain the *universalization* of morals—what the book calls “critical” morals. This is both the expansion of moral concern past every boundary of group and culture, and an evaluative attitude toward the moral perspective itself. It seems to be a contingent historical achievement. The book explores its possible sources in Axial-age reflexivity, Enlightenment dignity, and the Durkheimian sacralization of the individual in general, even as it is repeatedly threatened by counter-sacralizations that confine empathy to the bounds of nation, *volk*, race, or party. Here the question is how we should think about this critical moral capacity.

For Lukes, “values” are what are important, desirable, and justifiable to ourselves

and others (137). The extreme test of the relation between merely social and properly critical morals is atrocities like the Holocaust and other genocides. The book resists the “situationist consensus” that says anyone in that particular situation would have acted in those ways (99-110). But it also insists that we cannot let ourselves off the hook by saying that what went on in the minds of the people who perpetrated these atrocities is completely severed from our own morality. We need a “bridgehead” of recognizable motivation or shared rationality (116). Smithian empathy has to apply here, too, somehow.

The book finds its way out with the help of the empirical literature (from Schwartz and D’Andrade) finding that personal values vary surprisingly little across societies. *Practices* differ, because “what counts as” realizing shared values differs widely, but the values themselves do not. And so we end with two claims. Morals *narrow* along a continuum from “mere” conventions to ultimate values, with the latter being more shared than might first appear. Morals also *deepen*, not in the sense of becoming richer or more fruitful, but in the way the ocean deepens into utter darkness: morals deepen into *non-recognition*, where the second-person standpoint, the need to justify one’s values to others, fails or falls away, and the moral community shrinks to the like-minded, to tribalism. While never losing its essentially sober outlook, the book does try to end somewhat optimistically, by arguing that contemporary political polarization might be successfully overcome. Much of it, Lukes suggests, is largely manufactured non-recognition rather than truly irreconcilable differences in values.

WIDTH AND ABSTRACTION

My first worry is that the “width” thesis is an artifact of abstraction due to measurement. The claim that value diversity is narrow rests principally on D’Andrade’s study and the Schwartz surveys (D’Andrade 2008; Schwartz and Bardi 2001). Across the United States, Japan, and Vietnam, and across dozens of national samples, people affirm strikingly similar hierarchies of thin value-words. We all value responsibility, honesty, self-fulfillment, treating human life as precious. Within-society variation dwarfs between-society variation. The puzzle of why practices differ so much more than values is then solved with Searle’s formula: societies differ over what *counts* as realizing values they share (Searle 2010).

As the book itself notes in Chapter 1, however, Nelson Goodman points out that similarity is relative to context. Whether two things count as being alike depends on what we are looking for. If we describe values thinly enough, *everything* converges to similarity. Every society values “responsibility”, every society values “care”. But this is not a discovery about the true shallowness of moral disagreement, it’s a feature of the level of description we are operating at. If all the moral action is in the specification—if

what responsibility *is*, what it demands, whom it covers, is what different cultures differ on—then the formula “shared values, divergent realizations” is not an explanation of their disagreement. It is a redescription of it.

Take the book’s own abortion example. We are told both sides agree on the values of responsibility, privacy, and self-determination, and differ only in how these are linked to the world. But these rival “conceptions” of responsibility have such different practical implications that they might as well be simply rival values. The survey data can’t really arbitrate between these readings, because the surveys only ever ask about the thin word. The work of Jerolmack and Khan (2014), which the book cites approvingly, insists that values must be viewed in context, tied to norms and practices. But the book’s claims about width rely on a process of decontextualization that it elsewhere disapproves of. The book does offer “intelligibility” and “seriousness” as a means of bounding the space of valid values. But even here, it admits that an awful lot can be left over, especially if we take the time to understand why something seemingly unintelligible or unserious at first blush might turn out to be just the opposite on further reflection. Moreover, even if these criteria can delineate a space of values it doesn’t follow that this space is small. And the optimistic parts of the Coda, the parts about deliberation and polarization, need that space to be small, rather than a large field of genuine and irreconcilable conflict. How confident are we that that the range of real value diversity is narrow?

DEPTH AND DISAGREEMENT

A version of this question arises in the case of the depth of values, too. By the end of the book, depth is redefined as non-recognition, as an accidental or deliberate failure of Smithian empathy. But I wonder if that is what deep value conflict meant to Isaiah Berlin and Max Weber, the value pluralists discussed in Chapter 5. For Weber, at least, deep value conflict was intractability *given* mutual recognition. The method of *verstehen* is very close to the practice of Smithian empathy. The Christian of the Sermon on the Mount and the man of worldly honor, in Weber’s example, are not failing to take up each other’s second-person standpoint. The ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility are held by people who share a great deal in common. Weber’s claim was that the conflict between them cannot be resolved, only decided. That is the old, frightening sense of depth: irreconcilable differences among people who recognize one another, and reject what they see.

The book puts its redefinition of depth as non-recognition to work in Chapter 4, with some success. And it is necessary in the Coda as well. But I wonder whether substituting it for the old concept discreetly retires the question the old concept named. Are there rationally irresolvable conflicts among values that remain fully mutually

intelligible, among people who fully recognize each other's standing? If the answer is yes, that is, if some conflicts survive recognition, complete information, and scrupulous Smithian empathy, then deliberation, however well designed, will not dissolve them. It can only stage them. That is Weber's position, and I do not think the book confronts it.

Chapter 5 ends with a contrast between thinking of values as merely *trade-offs* (Berlin), opportunity costs within choice-sets, or truly *sacrifices* between incommensurable ends (Weber). The Coda returns us to that question. If the depth of morality just *is* non-recognition, restoring recognition through some method of deliberation seems to solve the problem of depth simply by definition. In that case, experiments in deliberation aren't just encouraging, they're guaranteed to work. That can't be right. If we observe preference moderation under conditions of accountability, we can interpret that as the discovery of shared values. But this is also compatible with the softening of positions that people were never deeply invested in, while genuinely deep conflicts—deep in the Weberian sense—remain untouched. The Irish case of Citizens Assemblies cited in the Coda is indeed encouraging. But, even there, one can read the Citizens' Assembly as an already-shared value of responsibility being jointly renegotiated, or as one side prevailing under procedural conditions favorable to it.

Solving all these problems is easier the more common ground you share. The general "anyone" of Smithian empathy, the "impartial spectator", is one way those shared values can be smuggled into the argument. The impartial spectator's views must come from somewhere. If we disagree, and try to empathize with one another, and your impartial spectator shares many of the same views as mine, our chances of moral agreement will be much higher. If our impartial spectators seem to differ a great deal, though, things will go much worse. Again, there is some acknowledgment of this in the book. For instance, a note quoting a communication from Samuel Fleischacker, remarks that while we need to posit a "perspective-free impartiality" in order to get Smithian empathy off the ground, "We don't need to say we have actually *achieved* such impartiality", just "hold it out as a possibility to which we aspire" (224).

METAETHICS AND SACRALIZATION

The author's own values seem clear in the book. I think I share most of them. He sides with a liberal naturalism over its various rivals, with Smith over Hume on empathy, with de Swaan and Geras over the situationists and Rorty, and so on. One place the book conspicuously does *not* choose is between Berlin and Weber, that is, on the question of what values *are*, and what it really means for them to be plural. This is a hard question for the philosophers, of course, but also for social scientists who want a meaningful link between the research they do and the values they espouse.

Consider, for example, the question of the sacralization of the person. That is,

the question of how the equal dignity of all humans became, in Durkheim's sense, sacred. Critical morals (in the book's sense) and human rights rest on that sacralization. Was its development a *discovery* about human beings? Or was it a contingent, collective representation that one tribe (our own) successfully consecrated? The book's normative voice often sounds like it wants to pick the first option. It's a discovery. Himmler's justifications at Poznan are a failure, even an obscenity. The rescuers were right. Bezalel Smotrich's standpoint is moral only in the anthropological sense. The counter-sacralizers and tribalists and Schmittians are wrong. And so on. Moral universalism thus has an authority that outruns its genealogy.

Durkheim, whom Lukes knows better than anyone, plainly says it's the second. These sacralized beliefs about human dignity are, in the end, a contingent collective representation that grew out of an advancing division of labor. He says this even as he believes that the cult of the individual is something we should be committed to and take advantage of for the purposes of social policy. In its much more bleakly Nietzschean way, Weber's view is on this side of the argument as well. Value commitments can have deep consequences for social organization, and this is why theory begins by trying to understand why people act from their own point of view. But in the end those values are not discoveries, they are primordial commitments.

This makes for a persistent tension in sociology as a discipline. Different wings of the field do of course want to advocate for particular moral views, or views with a moral element. Sometimes it's by way of a focus on practical advocacy or policy reform, where the model of advocacy rests on claims to substantive expertise. Sometimes it explicitly rests on some standpoint, where MacIntyre's "prison of our own upbringing" (MacIntyre 2013) is reimagined as a source of wisdom and insight. More grandly, though these days less often, it's by way of a claim to have grasped—and to speak for—where history itself is going. But, as a discipline, sociology is largely defined by the insight that morality as such is downstream of contingent social facts. Again, not everyone in the field agrees. But when sociologists want to emphasize what is most distinctive about their own disciplinary perspective, for the most part they reach for classics that emphasize the historical contingency of social structure, the immense diversity of social forms, and the dreaded "sociological imagination" that allegedly allows us to connect both to individual experience. In this emphasis on the variability and historicity of social life the field tends to side with anthropology (and of course disciplinary history), rather than with philosophy and economics.

When it comes to developing a position on these matters, as opposed to preferring not to think about them, *The Diversity of Morals* is a very useful book because it brings out just how difficult the terrain is underfoot, and just how little we have to stray from well-trodden paths in order to get bogged down trying to coherently and defensibly answer questions about the nature of morality as such, and how it relates to the findings and practice of social science. In the end, the book knows it cannot answer its biggest

questions. Lukes remarks more than once that some disputes are better continued than resolved. Perhaps that is the best we can do: to at least keep talking, in a civilized manner. I will claim one extended quotation of my own. I am reminded, a little absurdly, of a scene from *At the Villa of Reduced Circumstances*, Alexander McCall Smith's gentle comedy of academic manners. The scene is a ceremonial dinner at Cambridge:

The Master then rose to give a short address. 'Dear guests of the College,' he began, 'dear Fellows, dear undergraduate members of this Foundation: William de Courcey was cruelly beheaded by those who could not understand that it is quite permissible for rational men to differ on important points of belief or doctrine. The world in which he lived had yet to develop those qualities of tolerance of difference of opinion which we take for granted, but which we must remind ourselves is of rather recent creation and is by no means assured of universal support. There are amongst us still those who would deny to others the right to hold a different understanding of the fundamental issues of our time. Thus, if we look about us we see people of one culture or belief still at odds with their human neighbours who are of a different culture or belief; and we see many who are prepared to act upon this difference to the extent of denying the humanity of those with whom they differ. ... 'Here in this place of learning, let us remind ourselves of the possibility of combating, in whatever small way we can, those divisions that come between man and man, between woman and woman, so that we may recognise in each other that vulnerable humanity that informs our lives, and makes life so precious; so that each may find happiness in his or her life, and in the lives of others. For what else is there for us to hope for? What else, I ask you, what else?' (McCall Smith 2003, 56–57)

What else, indeed. Almost all of the people in these conversations are committed to something like the universalization story in their everyday lives, whether its origins lie in Axial transcendence, Kantian dignity under the shadow of God, Hans Joas's soul and gift, Durkheimian sacredness, or something else. Philosophical error theorists and moral nihilists do not, on the whole, want to live in a state of vicious anarchy. The same goes for academic Marxists, debunking Evolutionary Psychologists, hopelessly confused Critical Realists, biogenomic bean-counters, Scandinavian DBO enumerators, tradition-marinaded MacIntyreans, authenticity-obsessed standpoint epistemologists, and have-your-cake-and-eat-it pragmatists. All of them are people you are likely to encounter at conferences. They are all in some sense already in the same conversation as you. But the problem, in the end, is that you have to make peace with your enemies, not your friends.

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