How Cultural Psychology Can Help Us See “Divinity” in a Secular World

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Among the best metaphors ever offered to illustrate the limits of human understanding is the story of Flatland, a short novel by the English mathematician Edwin Abbot, published in 1884. Flatland is a two-dimensional world inhabited by two-dimensional geometric figures. One day the protagonist—a square—is visited by a sphere. But when a three-dimensional sphere intersects with Flatland, all that is visible to the square is a circle. The sphere tries to explain the idea of a third dimension to the square, but the square simply cannot understand what the sphere means when he says that he came from “up” or “above” Flatland.

Finally, the sphere yanks the square up out of flatland and into the third dimension. The square is now able to look “down” on his world and see it all at once. He can see inside all the houses of the inhabitants, and even inside their bodies. The experience is terrifying and disorienting. Perhaps you can empathize if you imagine being yanked into the fourth dimension—time—and seeing the birth, life, and death of each person you look at, all at once.

But there’s a gentler and more accessible way to share the square’s experience: read cultural psychology and then do cultural psychological research. Many of us who came to cultural psychology from ordinary Western psychology experienced feelings of disorientation and wonder. We had to alter and expand our mental categories.
In this essay we describe the ways that our thinking about morality changed in response to Richard Shweder’s writings about morality, and in particular his description of the “ethics of divinity.” We first describe Shweder’s theory of the “three ethics” of moral discourse and explain why the theory was so important for moral psychology. We then show how useful the ethics of divinity has been for understanding some puzzles about sexual morality, bioethical controversies, and the US culture war more generally. We close with an endorsement of moral pluralism.

Three Selves and Three Ethics

Shweder’s three ethics were first mentioned in a short section of a short article that was a reply to another article in the journal *Child Development.* Shweder (1990) described a standoff he had with his six-year-old daughter when she had refused, late on a Saturday morning, his request that she change out of her pajamas. He found himself unable to back up his request with any sort of moral justification as long as he was confined to the dominant language of moral discourse for secular westerners, which grounds moral appeals in concepts of harm, rights, and justice. But on the basis of his many years of ethnographic work in Orissa, India, he knew that there were other ways of thinking and speaking about morality. He then described three moral codes as follows: “A distinction needs to be drawn between moral arguments based on appeals to harm, rights, and justice (code 1) versus moral arguments based on appeals to duty, hierarchy, and interdependency (code 2) versus moral arguments based on appeals to natural order, sacred order, tradition, sin, and personal sanctity (code 3)” (2065).

The three moral codes arise, he said, because there are (at least) three ways to think about the self, each of which has implications for how selves should behave:

Code 1 moral discourse focuses on the individual as a preference structure with autonomy to make free choices. Code 2 moral discourse focuses on the person as part of a community, an attendant at court with a position or station or role that is intimately connected to the self. Code 3 moral discourse focuses on the self as a spiritual entity and protects that spiritual essence from acts (e.g., eating slaughtered animals) that are degrading or disproportionate to our spiritual nature. (2065)

This idea, tucked away in an obscure commentary, eventually grew into a major challenge to the cognitive developmental theorists who dominated
moral psychology at the time. As Shweder said in that essay (2062): “I think it is one of the problems with moral development research that Turiel, Kohlberg, Piaget, and many other Western social theorists have tended to define the moral domain in terms of their own code 1 moral reasoning.”

Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park (1997, 138) greatly expanded the description of the three ethics, based in part on a cluster analysis of the massive dataset that was first reported in Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller (1987). Here is their longer description of the ethics of divinity:

Presupposed by the ethics of divinity is a conceptualization of the self as a spiritual entity connected to some sacred or natural order of things and as a responsible bearer of a legacy that is elevated and divine. Those who regulate their life within the terms of an “ethics of divinity” do not want to do anything, such as eating the flesh of a slaughtered animal, that is incommensurate with the nature of the spirit that joins the self to the divine ground of all things.

The actions (taken from Shweder et al. 1987) that best exemplified violations of the ethics of divinity in Orissa mostly involved failing to observe food, sex, and hygienic taboos, for example, having a family member who eats beef or dog, a man entering a temple the day after his son was born (while the man is still thought to carry “birth pollution”), a woman who sleeps in the same bed as her husband while menstruating, a brother and sister who get married and have children. In Chicago, of course, most of these actions (other than incest and dog-eating) were not considered to be violations, and people rarely talked in ways that could be coded as the ethics of divinity.

The ethics of divinity is so easy to see in Hindu religious practice, but it can be found readily in many religions and holy books. In the Hebrew Bible the same logic is widespread: bodily processes and body products must be kept separate from holy objects and places. In the book of Leviticus, for example, it is said that when a women gives birth to a boy, “she shall continue in the blood of purification three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification be fulfilled” (Leviticus 12:4; If she gives birth to a girl, the time periods are doubled).

Similar concerns can be found in many ethnographies: A large percentage of the moral regulations found in many cultures concern what people can and cannot touch or eat, or with whom and how they may have sexual relations. (See Douglas 1966; Meigs 1984; Tambiah 1969.) Many of these
rules are not absolute prohibitions, for one cannot prohibit defecation, menstruation, and sexual intercourse. Rather, the underlying logic seems to be that people have a dual nature, including a spiritual self or soul, which makes contact with the divine at prescribed times (as during prayer), and a material self with a carnal nature and physical body whose needs also must be met. (See Bloom 2004 on how human beings—even atheists—are “natural born dualists.”) Rules of “purity and pollution” guide people in managing those two contradictory parts of themselves.

When described in this way, the ethics of divinity might seem to be a relic of traditional religious societies, all of which lacked running water, tampons, and other modern conveniences that would allow people to manage their biological “necessities” efficiently and privately. A secular social scientist might therefore expect that the ethics of divinity fades away as societies become wealthy and technologically sophisticated. Indeed, several authors have found that the moral domain becomes “thinner,” converging on the ethics of autonomy, as societies become WEIRDer (that is, more Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010).

So is the ethics of divinity of interest merely as a historical relic or anthropological curiosity? Do people still think and talk using an ethics of divinity in WEIRD cultures? Does having the ethics of divinity in our conceptual toolkit help us to see things we would not otherwise be able to see, as when the square was lifted out of flatland and into the third dimension? We—Haidt and Rozin—believe so, and we’ll try to show you a few new things now.

**Sexual Morality**

Much of the US culture war since the 1960s has pitted what we might call sexual libertarians against sexual conservatives. The libertarian ethos is the ethics of autonomy, which rests on John Stuart Mill’s harm principle: “The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant” (Mill [1859] 2003). Sexual libertarians often cannot understand why anyone would object to anyone else’s private sexual behavior. They see chastity not as a virtue but as a form of sexism or domination.

But social conservatives draw on a long history of thinking about sexuality that is, clearly, conducted in terms of the ethics of divinity. Evangelical pastor Rick Warren (2002) opened his mega-best-seller *The Purpose Driven*
Life with this line: “It’s not all about you.” He forcefully rejected the notion of self that Shweder had said underlies the ethics of autonomy—“a preference structure with autonomy to make free choices.” In its place, Warren and other evangelicals refer to this line from 1 Corinthians (6:19–20): “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? . . . Therefore honor God with your body.” This is one particular cultural example of the notion of self, presupposed by the ethics of divinity.

The ethics of divinity helps to explain why nearly all US states used to have sodomy laws, why many still do, and why these issues and laws are still morally and politically divisive today. Haidt and Hersh (2001) interviewed US liberals and conservatives about three kinds of sexual acts: homosexual sex, unusual forms of masturbation (involving a teddy bear, or the willing participation of one’s dog), and consensual incest between an adult brother and sister. They found no difference in the moralization of incest (an act that is often construed as having a female victim), but conservatives were more condemning of the other sexual acts, particularly homosexual sex.

When participants’ justifications were coded in terms of Shweder’s three ethics, large differences were found. Liberals spoke overwhelmingly in the ethics of autonomy and made hardly any use of the ethics of community or divinity. The idea of the self as a preference structure is shown in this justification of gay sex: “Everybody can do whatever they want. I’m not going to say anything about it at all.”

Conservatives, however, did not see human beings exclusively as preference structures who should be allowed to fulfill their desires. They used all three ethics. As one participant put it, allowing gay marriage would “allow anybody to do whatever they want, like voting for a slippery slope, voting to do whatever.” Such moral chaos would “lead to corruptions of the system, and it undermines the whole institution of marriage.” Another participant, discussing masturbation, said “It’s a sin because it distances ourselves from God.” This idea is unintelligible if you do not understand the ethics of divinity.

It’s important to note that conservatives used the ethics of autonomy more often (69 percent of all codable utterances) than the other two ethics combined (35 percent community, 26 percent divinity). They are, after all, US college students talking about ethics in a secular setting—a psychology study. But their many efforts to point to victims of consensual sexual practices do not mean that concerns about harm actually drove their thinking. Rather, they seem to have begun with emotional reactions and moral intu-
itions of condemnation, and then they struggled to justify their reactions using the ethics of autonomy. Conservatives were more likely than liberals to become morally dumbfounded—committed to a moral position but unable to justify it. As one conservative woman said, after condemning homosexual sex: “Well, I just, I don’t know, I don’t think that’s, I guess [long pause], I don’t really [laughter] think of these things much, so I don’t really know but, I don’t know, I just [long pause], um.”

Against this backdrop, we can now better understand Immanuel Kant’s struggle to justify his condemnation of masturbation using only the ethics of autonomy:

That such an unnatural use (and so misuse) of one’s sexual attributes is a violation of one’s duty to himself and is certainly in the highest degree opposed to morality strikes everyone upon his thinking of it. Furthermore, the thought of it is so revolting that even calling such a vice by its proper name is considered a kind of immorality. . . . However, it is not so easy to produce a rational demonstration of the inadmissibility of that unnatural use. (Kant [1797] 1996)

Trying to explain why harmless consensual sexual acts are so often moralized without understanding the ethics of divinity is like trying to explain earthquakes without understanding the theory of plate tectonics. It can’t be done.

**Bioethical Controversies**

As with sexual morality, so with other controversial issues that involve the human body, such as abortion, cloning, and voluntary euthanasia. If a community (such as a left-leaning community of bioethicists) limits itself to the ethics of autonomy, then it will have great difficulty understanding why so many in the United States object to these practices. If you embrace Mill’s harm principle, then the imperative to let people make their own choices, combined with compassionate or utilitarian concerns about harm reduction, will usually lead you to a simple resolution of most bioethical debates: allow people to choose whatever they think is best for themselves, and allow policies (such as voluntary euthanasia for terminally ill patients, or cloning oneself to produce fetal tissue that can help oneself) that will reduce suffering.

It was precisely this attitude—that everything should be allowed if people want it—that led ethicist Leon Kass to write one of the most famous
lines in US bioethics. The year after the first successful cloning of a mammal (Dolly the sheep), Kass wrote

> Repugnance . . . revolts against the excesses of human willfulness, warning us not to transgress what is unspeakably profound. Indeed, in this age in which everything is held to be permissible so long as it is freely done, in which our given human nature no longer commands respect, in which our bodies are regarded as mere instruments of our autonomous rational wills, repugnance may be the only voice left that speaks up to defend the central core of our humanity. *Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder.* (Kass 1997, emphasis added)

As Shweder had proposed, the key is the underlying sense of self. Kass is not expressing simple disgust for a medical procedure. He is objecting to the loss of an older notion of the self as a “soul” that must respect certain limits. He is horrified at the arrogance and solipsism of modern selves that are little more than preference structures in search of gratification. He is offering a *cri de cœur* against the shrinking of US morality down to the ethics of autonomy.

Haidt and his colleagues later developed moral foundations theory to bridge evolutionary and cultural psychology (Haidt and Graham 2007; Haidt and Joseph 2004). The theory tried to identify the innate moral “taste receptors” that underlie Shweder’s three ethics, resting the ethics of autonomy on the foundations of care/harm and fairness/cheating and resting the ethics of community on the foundations of loyalty/betrayal and authority/subversion. The ethics of divinity rested on the foundation of sanctity/degradation, which is closely related to the emotion of disgust and the mental process that we call contagion (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2016; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, and Haidt 1999).

Using moral foundations theory, Koleva et al. (2012) examined moral judgments about bioethical controversies. They analyzed the moral judgments made by nearly six thousand US respondents on a variety of “culture war” issues on a survey at YourMorals.org. These respondents also had completed the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, a thirty-item survey that gives each participant a score on each of the five moral foundations just described. This allowed the researchers to examine which foundations were the best predictors of condemnation across a wide range of issues, after controlling for several other variables (including age, gender, education, and ideology on a liberal-to-conservative scale) in a regression analysis.

The care foundation turned out to be by far the best predictor of peo-
people’s attitudes toward medical testing on animals. People who condemned such testing on the culture war survey also expressed the strongest endorsement of care and compassion on the Moral Foundations Questionnaire. But on nearly every other item that involved matters of life and death, sexuality, or the body, the sanctity foundation was the best predictor. Those issues included gay marriage, abortion, voluntary euthanasia, cloning, having a child outside of marriage, and using pornography. The regression coefficients for sanctity scores were usually about as big as (and sometimes bigger than) the coefficient for ideology (liberal to conservative). Sanctity even predicted condemnation of a few actions that did not involve the body, including burning the US flag. Some people see sacredness inhering in objects, which must be protected; others think the flag is just a piece of cloth, which people (as preference structures) can do with as they like.

In other words: the US culture war is not just a battle between two teams of political elites who emit cues to their followers about what to think about policy issues. There is an underlying intuitive structure to the culture war. Those who feel some pull from the ethics of divinity are predisposed to joining the conservative side on bioethical controversies.

With regard to Kass’s claim that the conservative side includes people who remember how to shudder, it is relevant that social conservatives have repeatedly been found to score higher on disgust sensitivity than do liberals and libertarians (Inbar, Pizarro, and Bloom 2009; Iyer et al. 2012). It is also relevant that violations of Shweder’s ethics of divinity has been shown to have special linkage to disgust, whereas violations of autonomy and community show special linkages to anger and contempt, respectively (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, and Haidt 1999). Once again, you can’t understand the full range of moral judgments and political identities in the United States without understanding Shweder’s ethics of divinity.

**Environmentalism**

So far we have been arguing that social and religious conservatives still think and feel using an ethic of divinity, which has been largely bleached out of secular liberal subcultures in Western countries. But there are a few cases in which cultural ideals and practices on the left make more sense once you understand the ethics of divinity. This is particularly clear for some aspects of environmentalism.

One key to thinking about the psychology of divinity is that it always manifests itself in a rejection of purely utilitarian valuation. As the sociologist Robert Nisbet ([1966] 1993) put it when presenting “the sacred” as
one of the most important concepts in sociology: “I use this word to refer to the totality of myth, ritual, sacrament, dogma, and the mores in human behavior; to the whole area of individual motivation and social organization that transcends the utilitarian or rational and draws its vitality from what Weber called ‘charisma’ and Simmel ‘piety’” (121).

Concerns about environmental purity and pollution could certainly be powerful within a morality limited entirely to the ethics of autonomy. One could be very concerned about the harms caused to human beings and animals from the sheer tonnage of carcinogens, heavy metals, and endocrine disruptors that industrialized nations dump into the air, land, and water each year. One also could see such actions as harmful practices imposed by corporations on unwilling victims in violation of their rights.

But some people within the green or environmental movement seem to be motivated by concerns beyond what Nisbet called “utilitarian or rational.” Pragmatic environmentalists who propose technological solutions to pollution and global warming, such as geoengineering or safer nuclear energy, rather than support reductions in energy consumption, are often attacked angrily, as though they had committed sacrilege against a “secular religion” (Pielke 2009). The writer Paul Kingsnorth was quoted in the New York Times as saying that such efforts are “repellant.” Using more technology would, he said, further distort the proper relationship between humans and the natural world; it would be an abandonment of the principle that “nature has some intrinsic, inherent value beyond the instrumental” (Smith 2014). When thinking about economic activity with environmental consequences, some greens reject a notion of selves as preference structures who should be maximally free to do as they please. The human body may or may not be a temple, but the earth is often seen that way.

Frimer, Tell, and Motyl (2016) asked liberals and conservatives to discuss gay marriage and found the predictable result: liberal discourse focused almost entirely on fairness; conservatives in contrast drew heavily on concepts related to sanctity. They saw gay marriage as a desecration of marriage. But when the researchers asked these two groups to talk about the Keystone XL Pipeline—a giant pipeline that would bring crude oil from a very dirty energy source (tar sands) in Canada to the United States—the moral codes reversed. Now it was liberals who spoke about purity (e.g., the pipeline would spoil the “pristine condition of nature”) and it was conservatives who talked about fairness and rights (e.g., “a business has the right to move forward with projects that are approved by officials”). Once again, we see that notions of selves as having rights (perhaps even
businesses as selves) run up against notions of selves obligated to respect boundaries, maintain purity, and refrain from actions that are polluting or degrading. Shweder’s ethics of divinity is used to construct arguments and guide understanding on the left, even if less frequently.

Nature and the concept of “natural” have become sacred or protected values (Baron and Spranca 1997; Tetlock et al. 2000) for many people in the United States. That is, violations of what is “natural” have come to be considered by some not simply as harmful, but as violations of the moral order. This is most apparent in attitudes toward the genetic engineering of plants and animals in the food supply. Using a nationally representative sample of people in the United States, Scott, Inbar, and Rozin (2016) found that roughly half of their sample were opposed to genetically modified organisms (GMOs). About 30 percent of these opponents treated the issue in a utilitarian way. In the judgment of these individuals, the potential harm to humans or the earth as a result of adopting GMOs outweigh the benefits. But 70 percent of the opponents refused to even consider cost–benefit analyses; they saw GMOs as a violation of the sacred order—the sanctity of nature. These divinity-motivated individuals were more likely to express disgust at GMOs and also were found to score higher on a measure of disgust sensitivity. Overall opposition to GMOs does not sort cleanly along the left–right divide; the fault line seems to run between the ethics of divinity and the ethics of autonomy.

**Conclusion: The Triumph of Moral Pluralism**

Lawrence Kohlberg was a moral monist. He asserted that “Virtue is ultimately one, not many, and it is always the same ideal form regardless of climate or culture. . . . The name of this ideal form is justice” (Kohlberg 1971, 232). Kohlberg’s assertion may have been valid as a description of his own subculture—the secular US left (if we leave out some environmentalists). But Shwederg’s writings on morality—particularly on the ethics of divinity—opened up a line of empirical research that has led current moral psychology to a much more pluralist position. (See Graham et al. 2012; but see Gray, Schein, and Ward 2014 for a current monist argument.) This move was obviously necessary for cultural psychology, but it turns out to have been a crucial move for appreciating the diversity of morality even within a Western nation such as the United States. As we have shown, the morality of religious US citizens, conservatives in the United States, and some environmentalists simply cannot be understood without the ethics of
divinity. Perhaps all of us have some ability to appreciate moral emotions and modes of moral discourse that are not our default or best-practiced ones. As Shweder wrote in 1991, about the power of cultural psychology in general: “Yet the conceptions held by others are available to us, in the sense that when we truly understand their conception of things we come to recognize possibilities latent within our own rationality . . . and those ways of conceiving of things become salient for us for the first time, or once again. In other words, there is no homogeneous ‘backcloth’ to our world. We are multiple from the start” (5). Like the square yanked out of flatland, cultural psychology is a constant reminder of our capacity for multiplicity.

Note

1. We both had the opportunity to do research in Bhubaneswar, the city in Odisha, India, where Shweder did much of his fieldwork. We were guided by Shweder, and by Usha Menon, who was a graduate student working with Shweder at the time. We are grateful to both for yanking us up out of flatland.

References

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