Value Pluralism and Moral Progress

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It is an honor to respond to Richard Shweder's engaging essay. Like Shweder, I am all for "critical reason," and am a fan of both Shweder's Thucycides, who champions "accuracy, impartiality and a decent respect for the native point of view," and Shweder's Socrates, who recommends "a principled commitment to explore the other side and to corrosively cross-examine each and every dogmatic pronouncement." Shweder's basic worry is that "identity politics" can give rise to a naive faith in moral progress that does not meet Socratic and Thucydidean strictures. His thesis is that the idea of moral progress is problematic, and that two apparently clear cases of such progress — the widespread condemnations of both the Tuskegee "experiment" and the practices of female gender mutilation/modification (henceforth FGM) — are less obviously progressive than is often thought. He contrasts "identity politics" and its associated political correctness, according to which FGM and Tuskegee are bad and their condemnation morally progressive, with "the Socratic educational ideals of the academy," according to which that progressiveness is unclear. Shweder defends Isaiah Berlin's value-pluralism conjoined with his own research on comparative moral psychology, according to which conjunction

> "normal" human beings respond to situations as if there are universally binding objective values, just too many of them….Those taken-for-objective and universally valued ends of life are diverse, heterogeneous, irreducible to some common denominator,…and inherently in conflict with each other…all the things thought to be good in life cannot be simultaneously maximized…there are always tradeoffs, which is why there are different traditions of values (that is, cultures) and why no one cultural tradition has ever been able to honor everything that is good.

Accordingly, moral progress seems chimerical: "taken-for-objective and universally valued ends" (also referred to as "terminal goods" or a "base-set of moral truths" taken to have "ultimate moral validity") are already recognized by "normal" human beings, but they "cannot be simultaneously maximized." There are only different tradeoffs to be had, and so no moral progress.

Instead of seeking progress, Shweder attempts "to see whether it is possible to provide the necessary exegesis of local context and 'native point of view,' so as to render 'others' intelligible, not as monsters, innocents or fools but as recognizably reasonable and moral human beings." He endeavors so to render those involved in the Tuskegee and FGM cases, thereby replacing the standard "moral progress" account of these events — evil here lurked(s), but we enlightened progressives now know better — with an account according to which morally decent people make (made) different tradeoffs and maximize(d) different legitimate values, but are not "monsters, innocents or fools." Instead, they are "reasonable and moral human beings" operating in "different traditions of values (that is, cultures)."

This value-pluralism enables Shweder to endorse a sort of moral realism, which shows "due respect for both the universal and the local." It also serves to underwrite Shweder's view that

> [T]he knowable world is incomplete if seen from any one point of view, incoherent if seen from all points of view at once, and empty if seen from nowhere in particular. Given that fateful and unavoidable choice between incompleteness, incoherence and emptiness I always opt for incompleteness, while staying on the move between alternative points of view. In trying to understand the way the worlds of fact and value actually are, I strive for what might be called "the view from manywheres."

Shweder here addresses "the world of fact" as well as that of value. How is value-pluralism applied to the world of fact on Shweder's view? Are there "local" facts, which are irreconcilable with other such facts? If so, what should we make of Shweder's anthropological investigations concerning "taken-for-objective and universally valued" ends? If not, should "the view from manywheres" be restricted to the world of value? These questions suggest two matters requiring clarification.

First, Shweder's case for value-pluralism (which requires non-plural "facts" concerning comparative moral psychology), and his sharp distinction between "universal objective truths about the physical world" and "representations of universal moral facts," both suggest a robust fact/value distinction. But "the view from manywheres" seems to deny any such sharp distinction. What is Shweder's view of the relation between "the worlds of fact and value"? Second, Partly because Shweder's pluralism seems not to be restricted to values, occasionally it seems indistinguishable from either transcendentalism/universalism on the one hand, or relativism/ethnocentrism on the other.

Shweder asks, "Is it really possible to formulate a meaningful statement about moral rights, goods, duties and values that is free from ethnocentrism, political self-interest or the projection of one's own subjective point of view?"; "Is it really possible to enforce the universal demands of morality without imposing one's own cultural conception of things on others?" Shweder clearly has some sympathy for the skeptical thrust of these questions: there is no escape from ethnocentrism, no avoiding the imposition of one's own cultural conception of things on others. And in some sense this is clearly right — as philosophers have often noted, there is no escaping one's own conceptual scheme, no judging from "nowhere." But this sort of necessarily-internal-to-scheme judgment can nevertheless be as "universal" or "transcendental" as you like — our judgments can be, and often are, both "local" and "universal." The local/universal and ethnocentric/transcendental dichotomies are false dichotomies. Shweder appears to grant this for scientific claims, but seems reluctant to grant it for moral claims. Why? Clarification would be welcome.

Shweder's value pluralism, according to which there are many (often mutually incompatible) worthwhile values and ways of life, is attractive. But other values and ways of life are not — or else such pluralism collapses into an unilluminating relativism. If so, some "neutral" or "objective" way of evaluating the alternatives as worthwhile or not must be possible. Shweder is right that "wisdom urges caution in arriving at moral judgments about other people's socially endorsed practices," but such caution does not require refraining from such judgments altogether. Otherwise the anthropologically informed pluralism Shweder endorses collapses into the relativism he rightly finds problematic.

Moreover, having "a decent respect for the native point of view" does not require holding that native points of view trump non-native points of view. Native

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points of view can be and often are problematic in all sorts of ways. They are immune neither from error nor critical scrutiny.

Shweder's conclusion concerning his two cases is modest. He defends neither FGM nor Tuskegee; he suggests only that they are "far more morally complex" than is commonly realized, and so deserve further scrutiny. He does not (despite his proclaimed philosophy of education) *deny* that widespread condemnation of FGM and Tuskegee are instances of moral progress. He urges only that the cases are less clear than we thought, and that we ought to reconsider them fully and fairly "without relying on a discourse of horror, and without viewing others as either moral monsters or moral idiots." This suggestion is unexceptionable, especially in light of his case that the widespread condemnations of FGM and Tuskegee are based on factual error, misunderstanding, and a failure to appreciate "the native point of view."

However, that those condemnations are in fact so based is not yet clear. Shweder presents a few bits of surprising but hardly determinative historical, anthropological and anecdotal evidence, citing, for example, African-American endorsement of Tuskegee, and a handful of scholars who report that many African women regard FGM positively, but who concede that systematic studies of the effects of FGM on women's sexuality are "rare," and the relevant information "scant." It would be surprising (to me) if systematic research established that FGM has little or no negative effect on women's sexuality. In that event, Shweder's warnings about the sacrifice of critical reason wrought by identity politics would be prescient. However, given the scant evidence available concerning the result of FGM on women's sexuality, and plentiful evidence concerning the patriarchal character of the societies in which FGM is common, the prior probability of future research establishing the benign character of FGM seems to me quite low. So *of course*: do the research; engage in critical reason; consider alternative accounts of Tuskegee and FGM, including especially those that reflect a decent respect for the native point of view and eschew the discourse of moral horror. That is, remember Socrates and Thucydides: do not judge independently of the evidence or fail to respect the native point of view. Shweder succeeds in playing the Socratic gadfly, challenging opponents of FGM and Tuskegee to justify their condemnations. But it is far from clear that those opponents cannot easily meet this challenge.

There is much more in Shweder's rich and provocative essay than I can pursue here. I close with three questions:

1. Is rendering "others" intelligible as "reasonable and moral human beings" itself morally progressive?

2. What in fact are the effects of FGM on women's sexuality? How painful is it? What role does it play in maintaining objectionable forms of patriarchy?

3. If the men of Tuskegee were white, would the "experiment" have been conducted?

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