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1

Introduction

Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour.

—DAVID HUME (1748)

Mother Nature . . . has put tendencies towards diversity into our hearts; she has placed part of the diversity in a close circle around us; she has restricted man's view so that by force of habit the circle became a horizon, beyond which he could not see nor scarcely speculate. All that is akin to my nature, all that can be assimilated by it, I hanker and strive after, and adopt; beyond that, kind nature has armed me with insensibility, coldness and blindness, which can even turn into contempt and disgust.

—JOHANN GOTTFRIED VON HERDER (1774)

THE VERY TITLE OF this book raises a number of questions. Is it a work of philosophy or of social science? Moralities, according to the anthropologist Kenelm Burridge, “are secreted in the traditions and religions or secular institutions of a society” (Barker 2007, 210).

Philosophers, by contrast, do not usually speak and write about “moralities” any more than they speak and write about “knowledge.” They have, for the most part, viewed “moral” as referring to what is singular, not plural. They seek the right or the best answer to what Morality requires or *the* moral point of view discloses—without hitherto coming to an agreement about what it is. Of course, this is not true of all philosophers. Here are some examples of dissent from this long-prevailing and still predominant view.

Concerning the philosophers of his time Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that it was “precisely because moral philosophers had only a crude knowledge of moral facts, selected arbitrarily and abbreviated at random—for instance, as the morality of their surroundings, their class, their church, their *Zeitgeist*, their climate and region,—precisely because they were poorly informed (and not particularly eager to learn more) about peoples, ages, and histories, they completely missed out on the general problems involved in morality, problems that only emerge from a comparison of many different moralities” (Nietzsche 2001, 73–74).

And R. G. Collingwood (whom the philosophers of his time called a great Roman historian and the Roman historians called a great philosopher) wrote that the Oxford philosophers “knew that different peoples, and the same peoples at different times, held different views, and were quite entitled to hold different views, about how a man ought to behave; but they thought that the phrase ‘ought to behave’ had a meaning which was one, unchanging and eternal. They were wrong. The literature of European moral philosophy, from the Greeks onwards, was in their hands and on their shelves to tell them so, but they evaded the lesson by systematically mistranslating the passages from which they might have learnt it” (Collingwood 2013, 65).

In our own time, Alasdair MacIntyre, reflecting on the state of moral philosophy in the twentieth century, wrote:

For on the view that I found myself compelled to take, contemporary academic moral philosophy turns out to be seriously

defective as a form of rational inquiry. How so? First, the study of moral philosophy has become divorced from the study of morality or rather of moralities and by doing so has distanced itself from practice. We do not expect serious work in the philosophy of physics from students who have never studied physics or on the philosophy of law from students who have never studied law. But there is not even a hint of a suggestion that courses in social and cultural anthropology and in certain areas of sociology and psychology should be a prerequisite for graduate work in moral philosophy. Yet without such courses no adequate sense of the varieties of moral possibility can be acquired. One remains imprisoned in one's own upbringing. (MacIntyre 2013, 7)

And David Wong describes the situation exactly, writing that while “some moral philosophers acknowledge diversity in moral values, very few seriously grapple with the philosophical implications. The commitment to defending the existence of a single true morality often takes the status of a fundamental commitment in philosophy, meaning that it will be among the last to go in the face of disconfirming evidence” (Wong 2014, 337).¹

Wong is right that most philosophers have been committed to the idea that there is a single true morality and, in the light of this commitment, moral philosophers in particular have at best been inclined to keep their distance, which is not always respectful, from empirical research into the facts, especially social facts.² This attitude has typically led them to deal with the questions addressed in this book by resorting to what T. F. Snare has called “armchair ploys” (Snare 1980, 369). One is to engage in *speculation* about what, for all we know, might be the case.³ A second is to claim that “when two cultures disagree in values, the disagreement is only apparent, for the two cultures are really incommensurable” (336), so that they are not really in disagreement (as with practices internal to their different ways of life, for instance, when what is immodest in one society is not so in another). And a third ploy is to claim that “certain moral

virtues, concepts, ideals, or institutions are found universally” (362) and indeed that some must be (such as the prohibition against lying). I shall examine these claims in chapter 5. Suffice it here to observe that all three claims clearly require close attention and responses from historians, sociologists and anthropologists.

Perhaps the most forthright defense of this arms-length dissociation of the philosopher from the facts is to be found in G. A. Cohen’s essay “Facts and Principles,” which defends an extreme version of the view in question. Cohen’s thesis is that basic principles and basic value judgments are “fact-insensitive” (Cohen 2003, 213). More precisely, he writes that “all principles that reflect facts reflect facts only because they also reflect principles that do not reflect facts, and that the latter principles form the ultimate foundation of all principles, fact-reflecting principles included” (231). In this extremism, Cohen admits that he departs from what “most moral and political philosophers are disposed to think”—namely, that all principles are sensitive to fact—but he holds that view to be “demonstrably mistaken” (214). Many of those philosophers, he notes, “find it obvious that our beliefs about principles should reflect facts about human nature (such as the fact that human beings are liable to pain, or the fact that they are capable of sympathy for each other) and they also think that our beliefs about principles should reflect facts about human social organization (such as the tendency for people to encounter collective action problems, or for societies to be composed of individuals who have diverse interests, and conflicting opinions).” As examples of such views he cites John Rawls’s statement that “conceptions of justice must be justified by the conditions of our life as we know it or not at all”; John Dupré’s that “it is . . . a commonplace that no normative political philosophy can get off the ground without making some assumptions about what humans are like”; Charles Taylor’s that it “is true of any normative theory . . . that it is linked with certain explanatory theory or theories”; and Allen Gibberd’s that “human nature, it seems, must be one of the things we should ponder in any search for broad reflective equilibrium in ethics” (213).

The difficulty that I see in Cohen's view is its apparent assumption that one's principles can be arrived at and adopted in a purely abstract fashion, prior to and apart from any factual basis. We surely need to know what it is about our society that calls for action-guiding principles (Rawls calls this a knowledge about "general facts" about society). The persuasive part of his view is the suggestion that we should act on those principles independently of facts that would bias our judgment.⁴

However, the many philosophers who accept non-extreme versions of the sensitivity of values and principles to facts and the theories that explain them have, nonetheless, been, as philosophers, unconcerned with examining those facts and explanations and thus with assessing how they bear on their views of morals. That is why they have typically engaged in Snare's "armchair ploys"⁵ and drawn, as Nietzsche remarked, upon the "morality of their surroundings" in the service of arguments and theorizing that they do not see as merely local in significance.

There is, indeed, a fourth armchair ploy, widely practiced by present-day moral philosophers over the last several decades: namely, engaging in thinly described thought-experiments in order to elicit "our intuitions" about what to do when faced with choices in a wide range of real-world situations. The point is to abstract from the complexities and "noise" of such situations to achieve clarity about what those intuitions are, with the aim of guiding choices, including policy choices in the "real world." These experiments typically involve choosing between saving more people from death and saving fewer. This method of reasoning has come to be known as addressing "trolley problems," after a scenario invented by Philippa Foot and developed by Judith Jarvis Thomson, in which (1) a "bystander" has the choice of saving five people in danger of being hit by a trolley by diverting the trolley to kill just one person by flipping a switch on the side of the track. This was then contrasted with a second scenario (2) in which there are two men on a footbridge over the track leading to the five, the trolley can be stopped only if a heavy object is thrown in its path,

and one man pushes the other, a “fat man,” off the bridge onto the track, thereby halting the trolley, saving the five but killing the fat man. Supposedly the (widely shared) intuition to save the five in (1) confirms a consequentialist principle, while some think that the (no less widely shared) aversion to pushing the fat man (“up close and personal”) in (2) confirms a deontological principle (Kant)—and so on, across countless elaborate variations of alternative scenarios that elicit and are meant, with ever greater precision, to refine “our intuitions.” Another, earlier traditional scenario involved a lifeboat at the scene of a shipwreck and the need to choose who is to survive.

One source of this style of reasoning is Henry Sidgwick who argued in his *The Methods of Ethics* that moral principles are acceptable when they correspond to, or even justify, our intuitions that deliver “Common Sense”—the “moral reasoning of ordinary men” (Sidgwick 2016, 101). Sidgwick was clear that those intuitions must involve reflection resulting from moral education and relevant experience. Without this last (arguably tautological) qualification, the current practitioners appeal to their readers’ intuitions about what to do in imaginary situations to arrive at guiding principles. But those intuitions are elicited by how the situations are described: by the *framing* of the question “What should one do in this situation?” to which we are invited to respond.

On this point, as Allen Wood has memorably argued (Wood 2011, 69), “the situations are described in ways that are so impoverished as to be downright cartoonish” (69)⁶—all in the misguided pursuit of simplicity, clarity and action-guiding precision. “The hope,” writes Wood, “is apparently that principles arrived at in this way will help us decide difficult cases in real life with Sidgwickian scientific precision” (67). It is not only that the absence of relevant information renders any intuitions suspect and unreliable. (How did the bystander have access to the switch? How did he know how to operate it? How could he know where the people on the tracks were? And what were they doing there? Were they there illegally? How could he know that there weren’t more people further down

the line? And what about danger to the passengers? We are expected to suppose what in real life we could never know. How could he be certain about any of these calculations? And so on.) Of course, the suggested imminence of killing or saving lives lends dramatic urgency to the imagined choice, requiring us to focus entirely on what an individual should do in the immediate situation. But Wood writes, this exclusive focus “cannot be regarded as either theoretically neutral or morally innocent” (73). For it precludes attending to various highly relevant questions. Why, in the lifeboat case, were there not more lifeboats? Why did the state and railway authorities not prevent switches from being tampered with and protect the tracks from interlopers? Why were such situations allowed to arise in the first place? Avoiding the fact that they do requires preventing or forbidding people from just engaging in trade-offs between people’s basic interests—“directly choosing between the competing interests of others.” It means guaranteeing and respecting rights and entitlements. It is why, for instance, “doctors are not permitted to carve up a healthy person in order to distribute their vital organs among five people needing organ transplants. It is also why railway workers and people walking across bridges have rights to be protected that interlopers on tracks do not have, and why bystanders are not permitted to switch the points on trains or operate trapdoors in bridges to save five by killing one” (Wood 2011, 79).

Wood does, however, concede that there are “some extreme and desperate situations in human life—such as war or anarchy, or sometimes pestilence, famine or natural disaster—in which it can look as though the only way to think rationally about them is simply to consider coldly and grimly the numbers of people, the amounts of benefit and harm, and the kinds of actions available to you that will produce the benefit and harm” (79).

Our recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic (or pestilence) does indeed make this concession seem uncomfortably relevant, for we have seen this cold and grim thinking at work, with consequences for alarmingly large numbers of people across the world. But in the light of that experience in different countries,

it is still by no means clear what the right policy choices were (see Klinenberg 2024).

Wood's conclusion was that we should *not* think like this—that to do so amounts to “calculating consequences with a kind of economist’s tunnel vision”: it is “dehumanized” thinking that totally denies “all our normal human thoughts and feelings” and is only appropriate when “the situations themselves have already become dehumanized” (80). (Here, I think, Wood goes too far. Sometimes, even in normal times, political leaders must take decisions to save lives, for instance in combating terrorism, where numbers count.) His argument ends up in a sharp critique of contemporary (and specifically US) society, where “problems about the distribution of such things as healthcare that (especially in a fundamentally unjust and inhuman society like ours) seem to come down to stark trade-offs between the deepest interests of different people and groups.” Thinking in terms of individuals facing trolley problems—“in terms of trade-offs between competing human ends”—is supposed to elicit “our intuitions” about what is morally essential, but, as Wood ends up arguing—and I agree with him—such thinking abstracts “not from what is irrelevant, but from what is morally vital about all the situations that most resemble them in real life” (82).

To this I would add that this individualistic “moral mathematics” eliminates human reactive attitudes and in particular cuts out any reaction of empathy, and it requires us to adopt a ruthlessly “objective attitude.”⁷ It exemplifies what Georg Simmel called “the *blasé* attitude” of indifference to the needs of strangers induced in us by the pressures of modern urban life, and what he had in mind when he wrote in “The Metropolis and Mental Life” that “the modern mind has become more and more a calculating one. The calculating exactness of practical life which has resulted from a money economy corresponds to the ideal of natural science, namely that of transforming the world into an arithmetical problem and of fixing every one of its parts in a mathematical formula” (Simmel 1972, 327).

It surely exhibits what the anthropologist Mary Douglas calls “cultural bias” (Douglas 1978)—“an array of beliefs locked together into relational patterns,” where action and social context are linked with “moral judgment, excuses, complaints and shifts of interest reckoned as the spoken justifications by individuals of the actions they feel required to take.” As “their subjective perception of the scene and its moral implications from each of them individually, it constitutes a collective moral consciousness about man and his place in the universe. The interaction of individual subjects produces a public cosmology capable of being internalized in the consciousness of individuals, if they decide to accept and stay with it.”

There is no assumption here that they must. This is not to assert the social determination of thought: there is “plenty of scope for individual disagreement, rebellion, mustering of support to change the whole context, or of emigration” to another more congenial mindset.⁸ This way of seeing cultural bias thus presupposes “some mixture of self-selection and of adaptation.” Interestingly, in the context of our argument, Douglas comments: “When asked by philosophical friends what epistemological basis I choose to anchor this approach to social reality, I answer . . . [it] is, in fact, not anchored at all, but rests upon the shifting interaction of intelligent subjects. What I claim to be stable and determined is not their individual positions but the range of cosmological possibilities in which they can possibly lend themselves by choosing to deal with their social problems in one way or another” (Douglas 1978, 14–15).

What is clear is that from within what MacIntyre calls the prison of one’s own upbringing what can appear to be “unchanging and eternal” can from the outside, in a comparative perspective, look otherwise: as contingent and one of a variety of possibilities. Sociologists and especially social and cultural anthropologists, such as Douglas, have engaged in exploring these (though again, as we shall see, not all agree). They used to do so, in the time of Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel, and of William Graham Sumner, Frantz Boas, and the cultural relativist anthropologists

who followed him, although for much of the last century until recently they have mostly neglected the explicit study of multiple moral viewpoints, practices and systems. It is only relatively recently that morals have once again come to be seen as a topic worthy of direct social scientific investigation and reflection.

In this book I shall look both ways—toward philosophers’ quest for a single best answer and sociologists’ and anthropologists’ assumption that there are several, even many, even very many—and ask how to make sense of this divergence.

A second question my title raises concerns our object of inquiry. What is the diversity of morals a diversity of? Does “morals” refer (1) to how people actually interact with one another—to their behavior, practices and customs? Or (2) to the rules⁹ governing their behavior: to prevailing norms and conventions, prescriptive and proscriptive, which they follow and sometimes violate? Or (3) does it refer to *systems* of beliefs about what is good and right and rules prescribing and proscribing how they should and should not live their lives? In his book *Ethical Life*, the anthropologist Webb Keane contrasts what he calls “ethical life,” namely “practices of everyday interaction,” with “morality systems,” which center on “obligations that are supposed to be grounded in consistent principles of great generality” that are “commonly subject to a high degree of consciousness and are readily verbalized as rules and doctrines” (Keane 2016, 133). The former understanding of “morals”—(1) and (2), which the French call *moeurs* and the Germans *Sitten*—was that of Harriet Martineau, arguably the first sociologist of morals, whose *How to Observe Morals and Manners* dates from 1838, and of W.E.H. Lecky, whose *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* appeared in 1869. It was also the topic of Edward Westermarck’s long forgotten *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*. The latter understanding—(3)—not surprisingly, is that of philosophers, for whom what *they* call “ethics” is typically located in texts and codes. They often use these as evidence for morals in the former sense, but that can be highly misleading. We need to attend to both of these ways in which

morality enters and shapes our lives and to the processes that link them—to the institutions, schools, and actors—teachers and preachers—that succeed and fail to bring them into alignment.

And the third question concerns diversity. Diversity is on everyone's lips these days, above all in relation to race, ethnicity, and gender. Progressive people say we should welcome it, not just tolerate it. Few say, though doubtless many think, that we would be better off with less of it. On the other hand, in many countries across the world, citizens are divided ever more sharply into encompassing and antagonistic blocs or moral-cum-political "tribes," posing a threat to a sense of common citizenship. I shall turn to this ever more urgent topic in the coda to the conclusion of this book. What counts as diversity, and whether it should be welcomed or feared is not at all as straightforward as it might seem. In advance of our later discussion, I want at this point to motivate puzzlement about diversity.

Abstractly we can say that diversity is the converse of similarity: it is the copresence within some whole of units (things, ideas, lifestyles, people—whatever and whoever they may be) that are dissimilar. But, as the philosopher Nelson Goodman has observed, "every two things have some property in common" (Goodman 1972, 443). Similarity, he writes, is "relative, variable, culture dependent" and "as undependable as indispensable" (438, 464). Here are two telling examples:

Consider baggage at an airport check-in station. The spectator may notice shape, size, color, material and even make of luggage; the pilot is more concerned with weight, and the passenger with destination and ownership. Which pieces of baggage are more alike than others depends not only on what properties they share, but upon who makes the comparison, and when. Or suppose we have three glasses, the first two filled with colorless liquid, the third with a bright red liquid. I might be likely to say the first two are more like each other than either is like the third. But it happens that the first glass is filled with water and

the third with water colored by a drop of vegetable dye, while the second is filled with hydrochloric acid—and I am thirsty.

“Circumstances,” he concludes, “alter similarities” (445) but so also, we may add, do the frames from within which we attribute them. Whether you see moral diversity and I do not, and where you see more and I see less will depend on what we are each looking *at* and on what we are each looking *for*.

I want in this book to ask how we can and how we should think about what the category of the moral embraces—whether we are (1) doing philosophy, or (2) practicing social science or history, or (3) just living our lives. In the first case, we tend to be concerned with justification, in the second with explanation and interpretation, in the third with practical judgments. Should we think of it differently in these, and other, contexts? Should how we think about it in one affect how we think about it in others? Is there any way of escaping from our own moral point of view when addressing such questions? Should we aim to do so and, if so, why? Does the term “moral” denote what is unitary or is what it denotes irreducibly diverse (Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley 2014)? When there is moral diversity across and within societies, how *wide* and how *deep* does that diversity go, where width has to do with the range of variation, and depth with the degree of intractability of disagreement? What I have written so far should make it plain that there is some rough ground ahead and that there is a need, as John Locke so memorably put it, to clear away some of “the rubbish which lies in the way to knowledge” (Locke 1975 [1689], 10).

Hume and Herder

In a famous passage in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1740, David Hume expressed the standard Enlightenment view of human diversity, summed up with

characteristic succinctness by Voltaire: “in general, man has always been what he is now” (Voltaire 1963, 25). “It is universally acknowledged,” Hume wrote,

that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions: the same events follow from the same causes. Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit: these passions, mixed in various degrees, and distributed through society, have been, from the beginning of the world, and still are, the source of all the actions and enterprises, which have ever been observed among mankind. Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English: You cannot be much mistaken in transferring to the former most of the observations which you have made with regard to the latter. Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behavior. These records of wars, intrigues, factions, and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science, in the same manner as the physician or natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects, by the experiments which he forms concerning them. Nor are the earth, water, and other elements, examined by Aristotle, and Hippocrates, more like to those which at present lie under our observation than the men described by Polybius and Tacitus are to those who now govern the world. (Hume 2008, 83 [section 7, part 1])

In fact, the Enlightenment and indeed Hume himself were more nuanced than this passage suggests. In his essay “Of Eloquence” Hume wrote that those “who consider the periods and revolutions of human kind, as represented in history, are entertained with a spectacle full of pleasure and variety, and see with surprise the manners, customs and opinions of the same species susceptible of such prodigious changes in different periods of time.” Alongside what was constant, there was, Hume acknowledged, considerable variation. “Interest and ambition, honour and shame,” he continued, “are the prime movers in all public transactions, and these passions are of a very stubborn and untractable nature, in comparison of the sentiments and understanding, which are easily varied by education and example” (Hume 1985, 97).

Indeed, the very empiricism typical of much Enlightenment thinking compelled recognition of the evidence of what was already known of the extent of human differentiation. Half a century earlier, Hume’s empiricist predecessor John Locke had written that “there is scarce that Principle of Morality to be named, or *Rule of Virtue* to be thought on (those only excepted, that are absolutely necessary to hold society together, which commonly too are neglected betwixt distinct Societies) which is not, somewhere or other, *slighted* and condemned by the general Fashion of *whole societies* of Men” (Locke 1975 [1689], 72).

It is, writes Professor Vyverberg, “gratifying” to find “at least fitful historical empathy” in the pages of Denis Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* otherwise given over to “attacks on the often lamentable past,” with “occasional attempts even to understand old and exotic religions, and to recognize some complexity in the history of Christianity itself” (Vyverberg 1989, 200). And there were, of course, other eighteenth-century thinkers who acknowledged such variation across cultures and insisted upon the Enlightenment-based ethical case for recognizing it, notably Gianbattista Vico, in Italy, whom Isaiah Berlin considered one of the originators of value pluralism, which he saw as thinking “against the current” of the time.

One such thinker was Georg Forster, author of *A Voyage round the World*, who participated in Captain Cook's second voyage to the South Seas and wrote: "Accustomed to look on all the various tribes of men as entitled to an equal share of my good will, and conscious, at the same time, of the rights which I possess in common with every individual among them, I have endeavored to make my remarks with a retrospect to our general improvement and welfare; and neither attachment nor aversion to particular nations have influenced my praise or my censure" (Forster 1958, 1:405).

In his book *O-Taheiti* (1780), Forster wrote that virtue and vice were internal to the diverse ethical systems of different nations and we should "avoid attributing our thoughts to foreign peoples" and thus assume "the right to punish or acquit them according to unfair presuppositions." For everyone "has his own way of seeing . . . the character and public knowledge of a nation, education, environment—and who knows what else?—are so many membranes in the eye, each of which refracts light differently, even if the dissecting knife cannot locate them" (Forster 1958–, 5:64, 35).

Forster was a natural scientist and a mentor to the great German explorer Alexander von Humboldt, whose five-volume treatise on the unity of the universe denounced the very idea of superior and inferior peoples and proclaimed that they were all equally entitled to freedom. Forster was a radical thinker (see Bindman 2002, 124–50) who eventually became a representative of Mainz to the French revolutionary convention. He advocated studying different peoples' customs and languages, and he also had a significant impact on Immanuel Kant, arguing, in a series of published critiques against the latter's acceptance of a rigid hierarchy of races (which Kant later abandoned); Forster also influenced and was influenced by Kant's student Johann Gottfried Herder, who is likewise claimed by Berlin as an ancestor of his value pluralism.

It is, indeed, Herder who is normally credited with planting the idea of cultural pluralism that was to blossom across the next two centuries. Herder once remarked: "I do not like comparing at all" (Herder 2002, 286) and wrote that every nation and culture "bears

in itself the standard of its perfection, totally independent of all comparison with that of others.” There are diverse ways of human flourishing, and concepts, beliefs, and even the sensations and sentiments that underlie morality differ in deep ways from one historical period and one culture to another; and these differences are rooted in and bounded by different languages. Even “the image of happiness changes with every condition and climate. For what is it beside the sum of ‘satisfaction of wishes, attainment of goals and gentle overcoming of needs’ which however shape themselves according to land, time and place. Thus, all comparison fundamentally misses the mark” (quoted in Sikka 2011, 35).

Moreover, Mother Nature has made us all ethnocentric. She has put “tendencies towards diversity in our hearts, she has placed part of the diversity in a close circle around us; she has restricted man’s view so that by force of habit the circle became a horizon, beyond which he could not see nor scarcely speculate.”

And as for the Greeks and the Romans, Herder continued, prefiguring and justifying what we now call cultural appropriation, “the Greek adopts as much of the Roman, the Roman of the Greek, as needs for himself; he is satisfied, and the rest falls to earth, and he no longer strives for it” (Herder 1969, 45).

As with Hume, later scholarship on Herder has revealed nuance and backtracking (see Frazer 2010; Sikka 2011; Piirmäe et al. 2020) that complicate the “pure” versions of their respective views that I have initially quoted. Herder was in many respects a thinker of the Enlightenment. He held a progressive view of history as the realization of “reason” and “humanity.” He did not think that the “close circles” of other cultures were impenetrable and windowless: they were accessible through empathetic understanding.¹⁰ He even thought that nationally based prejudice was “good, in its time and place” insofar as it “urges nations to converge upon their center, attaches them more firmly to their roots, causes them to flourish after their kind, and makes them more ardent and therefore happier in their inclinations and purposes” (186–87). And he thought that the infinite cultural variety he discerned was striving for a unity that lies in all, that advances all, and that was

expressed in all human cultures by different versions of the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.¹¹

Nevertheless, it will, I think, prove helpful to take our bearings from the opposition between the extreme, “pure” versions as stated by Hume and Herder respectively: uniformity based on human nature and the human condition (whose operative *explanatory* principles are ascertainable by scientific methods) *versus* diversity displayed in varying and encompassing forms of life (requiring *understanding* attainable by extending our vision of human possibilities). I suppose it is already obvious that we are going to end up dismantling this overarching opposition between oversimple views, but the dismantling should prove illuminating. From our discussion of these early thinkers we can already see that they prefigure several subsequent debates that have ramified down the decades. They saw a difference between, on the one hand, “passions” and “sentiments” that appear to be universal, and vastly varying “manners, customs and opinions” that express them, on the other. They did not draw relativist conclusions that would undermine their own moral certainties, any more than Pascal did when he commented that it is a “strange justice that is bounded by a river,” with “truth on this side of the Pyrenees and error on the other side” (Pascal 1670, sec. 294). They saw connections between their respective positions concerning morals and the methods appropriate to the scientific study of mankind: for the “Humean” these are unified across all of nature, pursuing causal laws and invoking experiments; for the “Herderian” they uniquely involve empathy and imaginative insight. But, finally, they did not yet make the distinction between the philosopher and the scientist, natural or social: they were all still *philosophers*.

And yet, once that division was made, the social sciences themselves, in turn, divided themselves along Humean and Herderian lines, classically articulated in the nineteenth century as a gulf dividing the *Naturwissenschaften* from the *Geisteswissenschaften*, and this division then ramified within the disciplines themselves. This opposition (between the nomothetic and the ideographic) has broadly divided the social sciences from one another, with psychology and

economics usually taking the Humean side and history, sometimes sociology and especially anthropology often inclining to the Herderian. On the Humean view, social science looks more like a branch of natural science as a whole, embracing human beings as well as “plants, minerals and other external objects,” in search of laws applicable across time and space; on the Herderian account, by contrast, explanation—or better, perhaps, understanding—requires deep interpretation: empathic insight into particular ways of living, suggesting a divide, more or less profound, between the human and the natural sciences. And this opposition is then replicated in different ways within the various disciplines themselves. Accordingly, some scholars seek common mechanisms across contexts yielding varying outcomes while others attend rather to the variations, ending their explanations with one or another kind of what Clifford Geertz has called “thick description” (Geertz 1973).

And yet, of course, this opposition is yet another radically simplifying abstraction that distorts the complex reality of what has been going on in the natural and social sciences since the time of Weber and Dilthey. Although many remain reluctant to abandon it, the old nineteenth-century dualism is no longer sustainable: as David Macarthur has observed, there is “as much reason to think that there are significant differences *within* the category of natural science, and *within* the category of human science, as there are *between* the natural and the human sciences” (De Caro and Macarthur 2010, 134). As Geertz himself has observed, we need to abandon this inherited conception of “two continental enterprises, one driven by the ideal of a disengaged consciousness looking out with cognitive assurance upon an absolute world of ascertainable fact, the other driven by that of an engaged self struggling uncertainly with signs and expressions to make readable sense of intentional action,” and recognize that what we have instead is “a loose assemblage of differently focused, rather self-involved, and variably overlapping research communities in *both* the human and the natural sciences” (Geertz 2000, 150). As we shall see in subsequent chapters, nowhere is this truer than in the study of morals.

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