

Moral Development, Culture and Humanitarianism

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Abstract

It is clear that the fundamental human rights and humanitarian legal principles are based on ethical values and moral rules. The most recent researches in anthropology, social psychology and moral psychology have shown the influences of culture on moral judgments and moral emotions. So there are strong evidences for the relationship between culture and human and humanitarian laws. This article aims to explain the psychological mechanism of the formation of humanitarians' beliefs by forming moral judgments and moral emotions in different cultures.

There are two different approaches to explain how and to what extent culture is effective in making moral judgments and moral emotions. The first approach is a cognitive one which claims that humans are reasoning beings and that they reason within a realm that we can label moral about welfare, justice, and rights in ways that involve concerns with dignity, worth, freedom, and treatment of persons. The alternative view emphasizes feelings, and the conception of morality in this approach is that conscience is formed and regulated by feelings and emotions.

The most popular theorists in the former approach are Lawrence Kohlberg and in the latter are Antonio R. Damasio and Jonathan Haidt. It is also important to know what the religious approach in this subject is

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and what the major conclusions of these studies are for expanding the human and humanitarian laws in the world.

1. Introduction

It is clear that the fundamental principles of values of humanitarianism that include most of the human rights and all of the humanitarian legal principles are based on ethical values and moral rules. On the other hand, the most recent researches have shown that there is a powerful relationship between culture's values and value-belief-norms, moral judgments and moral emotions of individuals. So there are strong evidences for the relationship between culture and shaping the individual's belief of humanitarianism. Therefore, studying the relationship between culture and moral development is necessary for understanding the psychological mechanism of formation of the humanitarianism beliefs in individuals and societies.. And as J. Haidt says, "A correct understanding of the intuitive basis of moral judgment may therefore be useful in helping decision makers avoid mistakes and in helping educators design programs (and environments) to improve the quality of moral judgment and behavior." ¹

To examine the above subject, it must also be noted that, according to the opinions of many researchers in the field of social science, the relationship between individuals and culture is too complex and the following question is seriously raised: Are human beings merely passive when facing cultural issues and formed values of culture? Or can individuals be influential in forming and changing the norms and values and moral judgments of a society? To study these issues, two subjects must be taken into consideration:

¹ Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review*, 108, p 815

1 - How is the mechanism of interactions between the individual and a shaped culture in a community? Is this relationship unilateral or bilateral?

2 - How is the mechanism of formation of moral beliefs in human beings? What is its role in acceptance and moral judgments?

Based on the above discussions, this article will be presented as below:

After the explanation of individual affecting and being affected by culture, I will explain the mechanism of how a person is being affected by society values to make it clear how the moral roots of altruism, which is the basis for human rights and humanitarian norms, are formed and if the cultural backgrounds for shaping the human and humanitarian rights norms are not suitable in some societies, then what is the role of individuals to improve and reform that situation? And if the moral values of a society's culture are compatible with humanitarianism, then how can we increase the internalization of these values by our knowledge about the mechanism of formation of the moral judgments?

2. Cultures and Individuals

The first scientific assumptions about culture were presented by anthropologists. They introduced and defined the concept of culture. The classic definition of culture, which was followed by most of the latter sociological definitions, was stated by Edward B Taylor, the "father of anthropology". The culture as described by him is "a mental phenomenon, consisting of the contents of minds, not of material objects or observable behavior".²

² Walter Taylor (1948) *A Study of Archeology Memoir 69*, American Anthropological Association, reprinted, Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967.p 96

In different books he also introduced the concept of culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. There should be an important role for individuals in a Society in formation of their culture because culture as researchers explain is "the product of what people continually construct with what they find always already there around them"³. To study the interactions between individuals and culture, it should be noted that in cultural psychology studies, societies are divided into two major groups, as Wainryb has noted these divisions and their geographical situations and pointed out their traits below:

Cultural psychologists' notion of coherent and consistent patterns of cultural organization is best exemplified by the proposition that patterns of culture can be broadly sorted into individualistic or collectivistic. According to this formulation, cultures with an individualistic orientation (e.g., the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand) structure social experience around autonomous persons, relatively detached from their relationships and community, and motivated to attain freedom and personal goals. Cultures whose core is collectivistic (e.g., much of Asia, Africa, and South America) structure social experience around collectives such as the family or the community; members of collectivistic cultures are identified largely by their interdependent roles and by the duties prescribed to them by the collective social system.⁴

Although the studies in cultural psychology have shown that individuals are less affected by society and social groups and their culture in individualistic societies, it should be noted that, according to all theories in moral development, in both forms of these societies, moral values are

³ Varenne, Hervé and Ray McDermott. 1998. *Successful Failure: The School America Builds*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

⁴ Wainryb, C. Moral development in culture: Diversity, tolerance, and justice. In M. Killen & J. Smetana (Eds.), *Handbook of moral development*, (p.212). NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers. Published, 2005.

mostly affected by the culture. However, in individualistic societies, a person is more prepared to be affecting or choosing the values. On the other hand, researches show that even in traditional societies often called collectivistic, individuals are also free and active in acceptance or rejection of those norms and moral values of society's culture. Nowadays this procedure has become a tradition as Nussbaum explains here:

At the heart of this tradition is a twofold intuition about human beings: namely, that all, just by being human, are of equal dignity and worth, no matter where they are situated in society, and that the primary source of this worth is a power of moral choice within them, a power that consists in the ability to plan a life in accordance with one's own evaluations of ends.

The moral equality of persons gives them a fair claim to certain types of treatment at the hands of society and politics. What this treatment is will be a subject of debate within the tradition but the shared starting point is that this treatment must do two closely related things. It must respect and promote the liberty of choice, and it must respect and promote the equal worth of persons as choosers.⁵

So, although in traditional perspectives the individuals are dominated by society, today researchers believe that in most reciprocal social relationships, even in cases that one party is more powerful and has more capabilities and facilities, the relationships are always reciprocal and it may even be said that as individuals affect the culture in adulthood, in return, children are effective in changing cultural perspectives of their parents at home, as described by Leon Kuczynski and Geoffrey S. Navara:

Traditional views of context in the social sciences generally emphasize how the environment constrains human agency by canalizing meaning and placing limits on individual choices (Fine, 1992). Approaching context from the perspective of human agency brings a balanced interest in the enabling

⁵ Nussbaum, M. C. (1999). *Sex and social justice*. New York: Oxford University Press . p. 54

*effects of context. Social and cultural contexts have been constructed by collective and personal action to support agency, not just to constrain it (Brandtstädter, 1997; Giddens, 1990). Similar statements can be made about the parent–child relationship as a proximal context of children's development.... However, the relationship context also incorporates enabling elements that offer children considerable scope to exercise their agency or to negotiate the nature of the constraints placed upon them (Kuczynski, 2003).*⁶

If someone wants to examine this issue from a religious perspective, it is right to say that divine religions have also noticed the importance of culture's effect on thoughts and feelings of individuals. For that reason, on the one hand, religions have given so many recommendations and guidelines for cultural safety and protection of culture. On the other hand, religions do not consider individuals as passive beings in front of a society's culture and have considered numerous responsibilities to create and change values in their society. Based on what was said in this section, it can be concluded that although individuals obtain most of the social norms like altruistic values from the culture of their community, and this issue will also be emphasized in the next section, but people do not drift in front of the cultures and while being affected by culture, in contrast, they influence the culture. After examining views that explain the relationship between individuals and cultures we will discuss the two theories on how the formation of moral judgments occurs.

3.Moral Development and Moral Judgment

In psychology, study of the development of the moral sense—i.e., of the capacity for forming judgments about what is morally right or wrong,

⁶ Leon Kuczynski , Geoffrey S. Navara , Sources of Innovation and Change in Socialization, Internalization and Acculturation In M. Killen & J. Smetana (Eds.), Handbook of moral development, (p.305). NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers. Published, 2005.

good or bad is called moral psychology⁷ and in this field of study, moral development focuses on the emergence, change, and understanding of morality from infancy to adulthood. At first glance it appears that the internalization of moral values in individuals within societies are formed by a simple process through education and the relationship with parents, siblings, peers and others during childhood, adolescence and adulthood and it seems easy to discover and predict the mechanism of this process and the details of its implementing procedure. But after a lot of studies researchers in moral psychology and related spheres like anthropology and social psychology acknowledged that understanding the mechanism of achieving moral development and predicting moral behavior is difficult and implementing moral behavior is a complicated process. So they say that despite several decades of studies, more research is needed.

There are a lot of theories about moral development and as Melanie Killen and Judith G. Smetana have written in the preface of the *Handbook of Moral Development*, "Research on moral development, whether examined in terms of affect, cognition, emotions, behavior, or neuroscience, as well as its applications for education or clinical settings, has greatly expanded over the past 20 years"⁸. And as noted before, it seems that one cannot understand how humanitarianism could be expanded in all its diversity without understanding its roots in cultural values and the emergence of moral development through being influenced by culture.

Moral judgment is the most important part of moral development and so it is important to know how it is formed. Moral judgments are defined as evaluations (good vs. bad) of actions or character of a person that are made with respect to a set of virtues held to be obligatory by a

⁷ encyclopedia Britannica

⁸ M. Killen & J. Smetana (Eds.), *Handbook of moral development*, (p.305). NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers. Published, 2005, p. xi.

culture or subculture⁹. This part of the article includes two most famous and affective approaches:

3.1. Cognitive-Developmental Approach

Some theorists emphasize the cognitive and rational aspects to clarify moral judgments. Rationalistic approaches in moral psychology claim that moral knowledge and moral judgment are formed by a process of reasoning and reflection¹⁰. This theoretical perspective was formulated by Jean Piaget whose work is the point of beginning of contemporary theories of moral development. In his research, he focused on cognition and reflection. He published his influential book, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, in 1932 to explain his theory.

According to the theory of Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, the first stage in moral development is the primary thinking of young children about moral issues that is characterized by egocentrism and a strict adherence to rules, duties and obedience to authority. In the first stage, moral reasoning is affected by authority without any reflection.

In the second stage, moral thinking relates social relationship with adults and through interactions with others; in this stage children expand their ability for considering rules critically by mutual respect and cooperation between them and adults. In the second stage moral reasoning is formed by perspective-taking, not egocentrism, and so individuals in this stage are nearer to fundamental principles of values of the Altruism because the ability of perspective-taking includes a direct concern for and responsiveness to the weal and woe of others. Piaget claimed that the best moral development appears in cooperative problem-solving events that happen in relationship with cultural values. Piaget's work was expanded by the American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. He

⁹ Haidt, J. (2001). *The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment*. *Psychological Review*, 108, p 817.

¹⁰ Turiel, E. (1983). *The development of social knowledge: Morality and convention*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

extended Piaget's work on cognitive reasoning into adolescence and adulthood.

In Kohlberg's view, like Piaget's, the moral force in personality and the roots of moral judgments in individuals are cognitive, not emotional, and as he wrote: "affective forces are involved in moral decisions, but affect is neither moral nor immoral. When the affective arousal is channeled into moral directions, it is moral; when it is not so channeled, it is not. The moral channeling mechanisms themselves are cognitive."¹¹ He claimed, like Piaget, that logic and morality develop through constructive stages. His theory holds that moral reasoning has six identifiable developmental stages and his six-stage sequence of moral judgment development is grouped into three major levels.

The first level, called pre-conventional, includes avoiding breaking rules that are backed by punishment, obedience for its own sake (at stage one) and self-interest driven that involves instrumental, pragmatic values of actions (At Stage two). It must be noted that concern for others in stage two is not based on loyalty or intrinsic respect, but rather a "You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours" mentality.

The second level is conventional. Conventional morality is characterized by an acceptance of society's conventions concerning right and wrong and understanding that norms and conventions are necessary to uphold society. This level includes stage 3 (interpersonal accord and conformity driven and define what is right in terms of what is expected by people close to them and being good—for example, a good brother, mother, teacher) and stage four (authority and social order obedience-driven).

¹¹ Kohlberg, L. (1971). From is to ought: How to commit the naturalistic fallacy and get away with it in the study of moral development. In T. Mischel (Ed.), *Psychology and genetic epistemology*. New York: Academic Press, pp. 230-231

The last level (third) is Post-Conventional that is characterized by reasoning based on principles, social contract principles in stage five and universal ethical principles in stage six.¹²It was a brief explanation about rationalism theory in moral judgment and as Darley says it is still an effective approach in moral psychology¹³.

According to the description of Cognitive-Developmental approach, Piaget believes that the best way in moral development is that individuals in interaction with others in society, reach to a rational cognition of moral values and, according to the Kohlberg's highest level of moral development (Post-Conventional), individuals in the highest stage of this level can reach to a reasoning understanding of moral values based upon universal ethical principles.

Piaget and Kohlberg emphasized the roles of thought and rationality in moral judgment (and consequently man's freedom in choosing and values), and the assumption that thought is centrally involved in human moral functioning. Despite the fact that there are many critical studies in some specific areas of these two approaches in the field of moral psychology, most studies show that individuals use thinking and rationality in cognition and moral judgments and this promotes their abilities in choosing values and prove that they are free to choose values by their rationality. So Cognitive-Developmental Approach is the nearest approach in moral development to Kantian ethics and is also is the nearest approach among different moral philosophy theories to Humanitarianism. Cognitive-Developmental Approach has widespread implications for how morality values have been conceptualized by social scientists.

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Darley, J. (1993). Research on morality: Possible approaches, actual approaches. *Psychological Science*, 4, 353-357.

3.2. Emotional Approach

The broad conception of morality in emotional approach is that moral judgments are largely formed through and regulated by strong emotions. The emotional approach is presented as an alternative to rationalist models. The model is a social intuitionist model because it deemphasizes the private reasoning done by individuals and emphasizes instead the importance of social and cultural influences. Moral reasoning does not cause moral judgment; rather, moral reasoning is usually a post hoc construction, generated after a judgment has been reached¹⁴. This approach also connects morality to evolutionary processes, the brain, neurology, and culture. Damasio and Haidt analyzed the connections among biological processes, emotions, and feelings; they also explained the relation between these factors and moral judgments. The central claim of the emotional approach is that moral judgment is caused by quick moral intuitions.

The emotional approach proposes that moral judgments appear in consciousness automatically and effortlessly as the result of moral intuitions. It also proposes that moral reasoning is an effortful process, engaged in after a moral judgment is made, in which a person searches for arguments that will support an already-made judgment.¹⁵

In addition Damasio explains that even the post reasoning is affected by emotion and emotion is also affected by body. He says, "I suggested that feelings are a powerful influence on reason, that the brain systems required by the former are enmeshed in those needed by the latter, and that such specific systems are interwoven with those that regulate the body"¹⁶. So according to this theory, moral development is

¹⁴ Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review*, 108, 814–834.

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ Damasio, A. R. (2003). *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, sorrow, and the feeling brain*. New York: Harcourt, Inc, p. 245

primarily a matter of the cultural shaping endogenous intuitions that are strongly affected by feeling and emotions.

4. Comparison and Conclusion

As mentioned in the previous sections, the formation of humanitarianism values depends on forming moral judgment among individuals and societies. By examining the functional differences of these two approaches we can achieve significant results about the mechanism of formation of humanitarianism values and also the mechanism of performing necessary reforms or change some attitudes of the societies.

It is understood from the previous explanations that both approaches agree that cultures are effective in formation of moral judgments, but in cognitive approach the moral judgments are formed by impacts of culture on thinking and reasoning process so culture's influence is indirect and the main factor in moral judgment is rationality. And so it may be different with culture, as Melanie Killen and Nancy Geyelin Margie explain: "Much more explicitly than Piaget, Kohlberg drew on Kantian ethics to define morality, and he utilized Rawls' (1971) theory of justice framework to formulate his stage theory of morality. However, like Piaget, Kohlberg defined morality as distinct from cultural norms and customs, and he did so by identifying principled morality as post conventional (independent of culture) and pertaining to humankind. In his seminal paper on moral development, Kohlberg (1971) gave examples of Stage six reasoning as acts of civil disobedience, such as "helping slaves escape before the Civil War"."¹⁷

So according to the Cognitive-Developmental Approach, cultural norms are accepted only if they are compatible with rationality. But

¹⁷ M. Killen & N. Geyelin Margie, *Morality in the Context of Intergroup Relationships* in M. Killen & J. G. Smetana (Eds.), *Handbook of moral development*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, pp158-159

based on the emotional approach the cultures of societies have direct impacts on emotions and affects, so in emotional process the culture is main factor.

Comparing Piaget's and Kohlberg's views emphasizing cognitive aspects of moral judgments with Haidt's and Damasio's views emphasizing the emotional aspects shows that according to the theory, focused on emotional issues, human being, in moral judgments, is constantly affected and passive not effective and influential. According to this theory making moral judgments by people is unconscious and based on emotional and physiological issues and since in the process of moral judgments, thinking and reflection are not effective and these judgments are coercive and non- arbitrary, individuals' agreement or disagreement with these values will not be optional. But in the Cognitive-Developmental approach, individuals are free to agree or disagree with cultural norms.

In reviewing these two approaches, much psychological, sociological, and anthropological evidence shows that in moral judgments, both thinking and reasoning factors and emotional factors are effective..Each approach has focused on one of these factors. But it should be noted that cognitive theorists accept that emotional factors are effective in moral judgments and decision- making in a special role, as Elliot Turiel Says:

To say that humans are reasoning beings with flexibility of thought does not mean that emotions do not play a role. It does mean, however, that morality is not primarily driven

By emotions, it also means that it is not mainly emotions that guide the formation of judgments about right and wrong. Rather, emotions are

embedded in reasoning, with emotions involving evaluative appraisals.¹⁸

Theorists of emotional approach also explain that rationalistic approaches accept that moral emotions such as sympathy may sometimes be inputs to the reasoning process, but moral emotions are not the direct causes of moral judgment. In return, emotional approach claims that there are two cognitive processes at work - reasoning and intuition - and the reasoning process has been overemphasized. So the theorists of the emotional approach have also accepted, to some extent, the role of thinking and rationality in moral judgments. But according to their point of view, in most ordinary and immediate moral judgments made by people in moral events, emotional factors effect judgments and moral action covaries with moral emotion more than with moral reasoning.¹⁹

So if we accept that reasoning and rationality factors as well as emotional factors are effective in shaping the value beliefs of morality and ethics and consequently have impacts on philanthropy, each of these factors can be used in certain social and cultural circumstances. Considering that the roots of values of humanitarianism lie in morality and moral judgments and, as previously mentioned, most part of the moral values are taken from public culture of communities, so it should be noted that if the public culture of a society is rich in moral values, and if there are no other obstacles, most people of that community will naturally respect the humanitarian values and human rights.

¹⁸ Elliot Turiel ,Thought, Emotions, and Social Interactional Processes in Moral Development In M. Killen & J. Smetana (Eds.), *Handbook of moral development*, (p.305). NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers. Published, 2005.p,10 .

¹⁹ Haidt, J. (2001). *The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment*. *Psychological Review*, 108, 814–834.

But if the positive cultural values of some communities have disappeared or have converted to abnormality during the time because of social, economic or political damage, we should not expect people to believe in all values of humanitarian or human rights and to be committed to them. In this group of communities, some positive moral values have disappeared or become the anti-values; the question raised here is that what is the role of individuals in improving the situation? If rational and intellectual aspects of individuals' moral judgments are strengthened, at least they will result in three very important benefits.

First, with one's awareness of the reasons why a specific behavior is allowed or prohibited, individuals find more motivation to do it or leave it. Moreover, due to this awareness, individuals comply more accurately actions with value rules in certain circumstances. These two benefits are in the acceptance and commitment aspects, but in negative aspects individuals reject the incorrect judgments that arise from wrong norms.

Emotional approach distinguishes role and effect for human emotions in two completely different sections (although Haidt and others have not stressed this division). First, in the formation of moral values in childhood and later and the other, the influence of emotions in moral judgments in moral dilemmas. And since their claims about the influence of emotions in these two processes seem acceptable, the mechanism of emotional effects can be utilized to strengthen humanitarian moral values.

The emotional approach in the first case (the formation of moral values in childhood and later) offers mechanisms such as Immersion in Custom Complexes, The custom complex has recently been proposed as the key construct for understanding development within a cultural context, it is a customary practice and ...the beliefs, values, sanctions, rules,

motives and satisfactions associated with it.²⁰In this case, it can be said that suitable cultural preparations can be helpful to shape the humanitarian values through Immersion in Custom Complexes. In the second case, namely the influence of emotions in moral judgments, we can also reinforce these emotions (if they are consistent with human values) in people's daily behavior to create some sort of guarantee for humanitarian values realization.

In the meantime, some gaps and vacancies remain, but even the emotionalists believe that moral reasoning can also be used in these cases, since the emotionalists reject the role of reasoning and moral thinking in ordinary and immediate decision-making and moral judgments, but individuals can have a normal reflection and thought and choose their own moral values. The emotional approach also accepts that one's moral reasoning is affecting on other people.

Therefore, the cognitive theory can be useful to offer a helpful and acceptable mechanism to review moral values to modify and complete them by individuals and also review the impact on others and the community to change their incorrect beliefs about moral values. Emotions also lead to altruism, Haidt says. "If reasoning ability is not sufficient to motivate moral action, then what is? Batson and his colleagues have developed the empathy-altruism hypothesis, which states that empathy aroused by the perception of someone's suffering evokes an altruistic motivation directed toward the ultimate goal of reducing the suffering."²¹ Therefore, it must be noted that if the moral values of the culture of society are compatible and consistent with humanitarian values, the basis for intensifying the emotional states of individuals in a society for more internalization of these values in individuals will be achieved through educational programs and media

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *ibid* . p,824.

effects. Obviously, in such circumstances the aspects of emotional affects will be used more than cognitive aspects.

And also if some social norms and values in a particular community are against the values and principles of humanitarianism, one can pay more attention to the aspects of rationality and thought and promote them within the community through public education, to undermine the values contrary to humanitarian principles and encourage the values consistent with humanitarian issues, as Turiel says:

If social relationships are evaluated and judged by standards that can differ from those embedded in societal arrangements and cultural practices, then it is likely that people will critique, oppose, and resist inequalities and conditions that allow for injustices in domination and subordination.²²

Turiel has accepted the cognitive approach and he agrees with Piaget that moral thinking relates to social relationships and stresses that development is a constructive process stemming from children's interactions with multiple aspects of the social environment. Moral development does not involve accommodation to social expectations, rules, or norms, and moral functioning does not entail compliance with authority dictates, societal arrangements, or cultural practices. It would follow, therefore, that insofar as people perceive societal arrangements and cultural practices to foster injustices or unequally restrict the rights of certain groups, there would be opposition. That is, the approach outlined implies that individuals scrutinize and critique existing practices, which may well result in opposition and resistance.²³

²² Elliot Turiel, Thought, Emotions, and Social Interactional Processes in Moral Development In M. Killen & J. Smetana (Eds.), *Handbook of moral development*, (p.305). NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers. Published, 2005.p,17 .

²³ Turiel, E. (2003). Resistance and subversion in everyday life. *Journal of Moral Education*,32, 115–130.

It should be stressed at the end of this article that to ensure the adherence of states to the humanitarianism issues that includes human rights and humanitarian legal principles, these values should be internalized within individuals of those communities. To achieve this goal, one should use foundations of education which can be obtained from moral psychology. This process should begin in childhood and continue into adolescence and adulthood. This is an important capacity. However, less attention has been paid to it. And international organizations like the UN and the Red Cross should consider it in their educational and cultural programs.

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