

## Moral Communication in Modern Societies

### I. Introduction

Social anthropologists and sociologists as well as legal scholars and political theorists have good reason to be interested in morality. Whenever they are concerned with social integration and social solidarity, or their opposites, anomie and deviance, they are concerned with aspects of the moral order of a society. One of the obvious ways for social scientists to investigate morals is to look at the ways in which the members of a society communicate with one another. This holds especially for modern societies. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that in order to find out what the state of morals is in modern society, one must analyze moral communication. I shall try to explain why this is so, and if I succeed, much of the theoretical task I set myself for this lecture will be accomplished. The other, empirical part will consist of the description of some key features of modern morality.

Although I shall not define the terms, it may be useful to indicate what I mean when I talk of *morality* and *morals* and what I understand by *communication*, and *moral communication*.

I take morality to be a reasonably coherent set of notions of what is right and what is wrong, a set of notions about the good life that guide human action beyond the immediate gratification of desires and the momentary demands of a situation. Such notions, as all notions, are of course held by individuals. Their origin, however, is intersubjective: they are constructed in long historical chains of communicative interactions, and they are selected, maintained and transmitted in complex social processes. Over the generations they come to form distinct historical traditions in which a particular view of the good life and, correspondingly, of the bad life, is articulated. This means that some conceptions of what is right and what is wrong are censored, others systematized and canonized. Thus a certain coherence between the notions is achieved, an ideal conception of morality is established. The ideal serves as the norm in the organization of collective life. When the ways to achieve the moral

---

<sup>1</sup> The following observations evolved from lectures first given in 1995 at the Universities of Erlangen, Vienna and Salzburg. Revised versions were presented in 1996 at the Congress of the Nordic Semiotic Association in Imatra, Finland and at the University of Bergen. Two later versions were used in lectures at the Collegium Budapest/Institute of Advanced Study in 1997, and at the Meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences in Denver in 1998.

ideal and the limits of tolerance for aberrations from the ideal are marked out, the foundations for the moral order of a society are laid. When, in addition, rewards for following the norm, and punishments for serious deviations from it are institutionalized, the society's moral order is fully established.

When I speak of communication, I refer neither intra-organismic "communication" nor to "communication" between systems. I restrict my use of the term to social interactions that are based on socially constructed sign systems, particularly, but not exclusively, language. Such interactions are essential to the organization of human collective life. They are especially important in making possible the effective transmission of the social stock of knowledge and the traditions of a society, including that of its moral order. Communicative processes are either reciprocal or unilateral; they are either direct, face-to-face, or mediated in a number of ways. They occur between individuals as individuals or as incumbents of office or representatives of groups and other socially defined categories. Furthermore, communication may be between anonymous senders and equally anonymous receivers.

As for *moral communication*, there is an obvious distinction between thematization of morals and moralizing. Thematization may be, but rarely is, free of moralizing, and moralizing need not, but sometimes does employ thematization. Thematization ranges from descriptive statements about moral values here and there, and narratives of explicitly moral examples of conduct all the way to abstract formulations of ethical principles and criteria. Moralizing is either positive, as in praise, or negative, as in condemnation, and it may consist both of the evaluations of the behavior of others as well as of one's own actions.

The addressees of moral communication may also be the objects of moralizing, as a child being scolded, or they may be the recipients of moralizing about others, as those listening to gossip. The methods of moralizing may be linguistic in the narrow sense of the term: semantic-lexical, prosodic or rhetorical. Accompanying them are paralinguistic, mimetic or gestural forms of expression. These forms may also stand by themselves and convey additional morally significant points. Furthermore, certain small genres that may or may not have a primary moral function, *e.g.*, maxims and proverbs, may be used as formula-like components of moralizing communication either standing by themselves or as building blocks of larger genres such as moral sermons.

Finally, moralizing varies in general style. It may be either direct, in the form of straightforward praise or complaint, injunction, accusation, indignation, *etc.*, or it may be indirect in the form of litotes, questions, if/then formulations, certain

kinds of teasing, *etc.* Straightforward moral communication may be made indirect by oblique and ironic modifications.

## II. Assumptions

I must point out certain general limitations to the observations I intend to present. (I shall point out some specific ones later). I do not intend to take up certain issues that could, and should, be raised when morality is discussed. Among the most important of these is the question about the source of morality. Does it originate in a universal aspect of the human condition, and if so, is it possible to map that source with some degree of accuracy? Or is it merely a variable product of historical conditions and changing social constructions? And if that should be the case, does it imply that morality, too, is to be viewed in the perspective of radical historical relativism?

These are not new questions. They have been raised since the early days of philosophy. Various answers were given to them. Although I shall not try to take up these questions here, I think that I should indicate briefly the ontological and epistemological presuppositions for my observations on the nature of morality in modern societies.

I assume that there *is* a universal human source of morality. It is to be found in a constitutive feature of human intersubjectivity, the *reciprocity of perspectives*. The term, coined by Theodor Litt<sup>2</sup>, became the cornerstone of Alfred Schutz's protosociological theory of intersubjectivity and of his description of the world of everyday life. Schutz did not write much about moral matters. However, I think that his analysis of the interactional consequences of the reciprocity of perspectives can be extended into an account of the origins of morality<sup>3</sup>.

Intersubjectivity is an apparently simple fact of human life. As Husserl and Schutz kept pointing out, in the natural attitude of everyday life we take it for granted that we are not alone in the world. But, as they also showed, this simplicity rests on many general preconditions. The most obvious and the most important among them is human subjectivity. I do not think here of the trivial fact that there could be no intersubjective world without subjects. What I have in mind is the peculiar nature of human subjectivity with its specific structure of consciousness and temporality, and with its faculty to instill meaning into the

---

<sup>2</sup> *Individuum und Gemeinschaft. Grundlegung der Kulturanthropologie*, Berlin 1926<sup>3</sup>, p.221

<sup>3</sup> As I tried to show in my "On the Intersubjective Constitution of Morals", in Steven Galt Crowell (ed.), *The Prism of the Self. Philosophical Essays in Honor of Maurice Natanson*, Dordrecht, Boston, London 1995, 73-92

most ordinary actions in everyday existence as well as into the big projects of life, and with its elementary emotional repertoire<sup>4</sup>.

The element of human subjectivity that is specifically involved in the constitution of morality is the principle of the reciprocity of perspectives. Intersubjectivity cannot be imagined without the automatic operation of this principle in the human awareness of the world. It is therefore indirectly responsible for the diverse intersubjective constructions of morality that form the foundation of the historical moral orders of human societies. It is the foundation upon which the edifice of an entire world is built: a world inhabited by others like us who hold us accountable for our actions and whom we hold responsible for theirs.

My introductory remarks were intended, first, to define the basic terms of the argument and, second, to indicate its ontological and epistemological frame. I now turn to my topic, a discussion of the nature of morality in modern societies. I shall begin by anticipating the conclusions, that is to say, I will summarize the outcome of my argument and only then develop it step by step. Knowing the end should make it easier to follow the steps which lead to it from the beginning. In a first step I shall summarize the well-known views on morality in classical sociological theory. I shall then point out certain problems inherent in these views and show how they can be resolved. Finally, I shall add a hypothesis of sorts about the dominant style of moral communication in modern societies<sup>5</sup>.

### III. The argument

As the main sociological theories have it, morality largely disappeared from the social structure of modern societies. Its great dominant institutions, the economy and the state, are said to follow functional norms that are in fact, although not always in their self-legitimatory rhetoric, emancipated from the traditional moral order. They no longer require justification by a transcendent religious universe. Once the view that morality was eliminated from modern social structure became part of the sociological consensus, it was a short step to another assumption. It was not only taken for granted that morals had no place in the rational-functional organization of the social structure, it was also assumed that it had vanished altogether.

---

<sup>4</sup> In some traditions of moral philosophy, certain elementary emotions (sympathy, empathy) were taken to be not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition of morality, its sole source.

<sup>5</sup> An earlier version of parts of the following argument was published under the title "Privatization of Religion and Morals", in Paul Heelas, Scott Lash and Paul Morris (eds.) *Detraditionalization. Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity*, Oxford 1996, 72-86

Granting that the main diagnosis may be essentially correct, the corresponding assumption is not at all self-evident. We only need to open our eyes and ears to the world around us to notice the continued presence of morality. It pervades the diverse social interactions in which we are involved everyday even if it is not the kind of morality which older moral authorities might have liked us to have, but it nonetheless contains view of the good life.

At the end I shall suggest that in modern society the dominant style of moral communication shows a preference for indirect moralizing. The suggestion is speculative because the evidence in support of it is not quite as systematic as the evidence for the continued presence of morality in the form of moralizing.

These are going to be the steps of my argument. Now I shall place in historical perspective the reasons, first for accepting the classical sociological assertion that morality has largely disappeared from the social structure of modern societies and, second for refusing to accept the corresponding assumption that morality has in consequence entirely disappeared from society.

#### IV. The waning of the traditional moral order

In archaic societies religion, morality and law (insofar as one may speak of law in the absence of written codices) had a common basis in social structure. If this is an oversimplification, one may at the very least say that the institutions that involved different functions in social life were very closely coordinated - and that applied in particular to those institutions that served religious, moral and legal purposes. The conception of the good life which is at the heart of the moral order of every society was a clearly articulated and specified in a wide range of *do's* and *don'ts*. Because life ran its course in small communities, breaches of the moral order were immediately visible, as were their punishments. The authority claimed for the moral order was legitimated by systematic reference to a transcendent sacred universe. This remained the case even when morality and religion were no longer considered to be one and the same. Orientation, including moral orientation in such a world was relatively simple.

It is obvious that in modern societies the features a moral order of this kind are no longer even distantly approximated. How did this come about?

In the course of Near Eastern and Western history, moral, religious and legal functions of collective life were increasingly arranged in specialized and

somewhat separate institutions that were systematically arranged to serve a particular set of closely related functions. The codification of rules of conduct and misconduct in the form of law, as for example in the Code of Hammurabi is a case in point. Although not as exclusively attributed to a divine source as, e.g., the Ten Commandments, such codes were not fully detached from the sacred universe. Law remained holy to varying extents at least to the post-revolutionary Code Napoléon. During this entire period, religious institutions continued to be the official home of morals.

As the pace of functional differentiation of political, economic and legal functions of social life that marked Western societies since the late Middle Ages accelerated, neither religion nor the moral order was exempted from the general process. Yet, even after the emergence of the state and the economy as semi-autonomous domains, religious institutions remained the social-structural basis of the moral order for a long period. But, as the churches, too, were subject to institutional specialization that which was considered their proper domain, religion, was increasingly restricted. They were to lose their role in the polity and the economy. That which for several centuries still remained their generally admissible area of influence was the family and the individual.

Consequently, the social and moral discipline enforced by religious institutions decreased apace. The complex cultural and structural transformations to which we attach the simplifying labels Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, accelerated the process, sparing, for a century or two, only the peripheries of modernization and, in a different way and for different reasons, the United States of America. Both religion and morals were increasingly individualized and, first in the case of religion and subsequently in the case of morals, privatized. Both religion and morals turned inward. Having lost their social-structural home in the big public institutions, religion was transformed into private faith, morality into subjective conscience.

Almost a century ago, Durkheim thought that if organic solidarity - as he termed the moral order necessary for societies with a complex division of labor - did not fill the vacuum left by the decline of the traditional moral order associated with simpler societies, modern society would become dangerously anomic. Keeping his conviction that a society without a moral order at its core could not survive, Durkheim searched for solutions in what today some would call civic culture or civil society, others intermediate institutions and still others social capital. Nearly fifty years later, Theodor Geiger, an important sociologist of law, started from a similar diagnosis. His conclusions, however, were quite different. He, too, took it for granted that in modern societies the traditional, fairly homogeneous and obligatory moral order was dissolving. But in his view

this was a necessary condition for the evolution of modern society. A generally obligatory and behaviorally specific moral order appeared to him incompatible with a rationally organized, functionally differentiated modern society. According to him, those parts of traditional morality that had not been transformed into positive law, could only survive if they became socially irrelevant and, to use his term, spiritualized.

### V. Morality-in-use

Durkheim's and Geiger's view that modern societies no longer possess a generally obligatory moral order is shared by most contemporary social scientists and must be accepted as essentially correct. However, Durkheim's and Geiger's conclusions about the consequences of this state of affairs are another matter.

Durkheim was probably wrong in postulating that no society, not even complex modern society, could exist without the integrating force of a specific and at the same time generally obligatory moral code. On the contrary, it makes more sense to assume with Geiger that the rational organization of differentiated institutions in modern social structures not only could well do without such a moral order, but would be only impeded by it. Using Geiger's metaphor, one may say that morality retreated from the social structure. One may also accept Geiger's notion that the type of morality that could best survive in a situation in which it must make do without an institutional home, and in which most *do's* and *don'ts* have become codified in a system of positive law, is a kind of *Gesinnungsethik*, that is, an ethics of subjective disposition and motivation rather than a traditional ethics of responsibility and accountability. But Geiger is wrong on another important issue. In the first place, some elements of traditional morality did survive. This could perhaps be explained away as some sort of fossilized relic of the past. But Geiger's assertion that whatever morality remained evaporated into the rarefied air of a pure spirituality is clearly in error.

There is another possibility regarding the fate of morals in the modern world. It should be remembered that morality always had been a constitutive dimension of concrete face-to-face social interactions. It permeated what Goffman called the interaction order both in archaic societies in which it had no institutional basis of its own, as well as in traditional societies in which its basis was to be found in religious-political and, after the post-Macchiavellian emancipation of power, in religious institutions. Could it not be that, after the loss of the religious-moral institutional edifice which it occupied in traditional society, morality continued to keep its home in the interaction order?

To put it in different terms: Historically, what I should like to call morality-in-use came first. Under certain social conditions more elaborate moral institutions emerged from it until, in ancient civilizations, morally significant notions and ideas were built into complex systems of ethics. These had their canons and catechisms and were infused into the institutional norms of the social structure. Eventually, they developed a structural basis of their own in religious-moral institutions. Evidently, the emergence of such a cultural superstructure and organizational basis did not make practical morality disappear from the everyday life of society, although it did exert a definite influence upon it. To be sure, the degree of influence varied, depending on the plausibility and successful diffusion of an elevated moral rhetoric and a moral vocabulary of motives, and depending on the degree of institutional enforcement of moral dogmas and catechisms.

In modern societies, homogeneous, unitary moral orders of this kind are no longer embedded in the social structure. Notions of good and bad, right and wrong, nonetheless continue to be relevant to the conduct of life and, concretely, to the planning, execution and evaluation of one's own and other people's actions. Although a dogmatic hierarchy of values containing canonic conceptions of the good life is no longer uniformly transmitted and enforced by an institutional apparatus, some notions of right and wrong are still passed on by various channels, most visibly and importantly, by intermediary institutions. The main early sources are the family and peer groups. They later include local branches of larger societal groups, associations and institutions such as civic organizations, clubs, and of course religious congregations, as well as schools, seminars and academies. Intermediary institutions are also the main source of at least partial enforcement of such moralities in the interaction order. In sum, modern societies, too, have their own varieties of morality-in-use.

When we complain about others or accuse them of misdeeds of one kind or another, when we apologize for our own actions and faults, when we become indignant and invite others to join in our indignation, when we praise and condemn, when we pronounce maxims and quote proverbs, when we provide or seek advice, and when we gossip, preach and swear, we engage in explicit or implicit moral communication. Thereby we keep proving to others, as others are demonstrating to us, that some kind of morality is still practiced everywhere.

Although we are aware of this in our common sense knowledge, social scientists need to acquire more systematic evidence. In a series of investigations my colleagues and I at first devoted our efforts to the description and analysis of the most important *forms* employed in such concrete processes

of moral communication. We thought that an approach close to the realities of everyday life would lead us to the *substantive* aspects of modern morality. In fact, we found many communicative forms including genres of moral communication and learned more than a little about the moral sense articulated in these forms. We glimpsed the contours of the repertoire of moral communication in contemporary German society. Most, although not all the observed features would probably find their analogue in other comparable societies<sup>6</sup>.

What we found indeed confirmed the general assumption of contemporary sociology that no single obligatory moral system of values was to be found. But we also found incontrovertible confirmation for the existence of morality-in-use, or, more precisely, moralities-in-use in everyday interaction in the most diverse social milieus.

## VI. Indirect moralizing

We also found a substantial amount of confirmation for the theoretically motivated hunch that in modern societies there is a tendency to prefer indirect to direct moralizing. I shall devote the final part of my lecture to this topic. I begin with some thoughts on why modern societies might prefer indirect styles of moralizing.

It is likely that a certain degree of moral homogeneity is useful or even essential for the successful accomplishment of many kinds of social interaction. Thus, for example, moral communication in homogeneous social milieus runs little risk of conflict. However, in societies in which many if not most significant kinds of interaction are restricted to narrowly functional, highly anonymous social roles, moral homogeneity is no longer necessary. Persons who do not know each other well may perform circumscribed joint tasks quite successfully. However, moral communication, for example, invitations to joint indignation, to gossip, *etc.*, will be inherently risky. Obviously, under such conditions the specific form of communicative interaction that carries the strongest risk of moral uncertainty and potential conflict is direct moralizing. Other things being equal, the combination of functional differentiation, pluralism and anonymity in modern life is likely to encourage a strong

---

<sup>6</sup> The investigations were sponsored by the German Science Foundation and directed by Jörg Bergmann and myself. Its results were published in two volumes (Jörg Bergmann and Thomas Luckmann, eds., *Die Kommunikative Konstruktion der Moral, I (Struktur und Dynamik der Formen moralischer Kommunikation), II (Von der Moral zu den Moralen)*, Opladen, Wiesbaden 1999. A related study of moral communication in intermediary institutions, organized by me, was supported by the Bertelsmann Foundation (*Moral im Alltag. Sinnvermittlung und moralische Kommunikation in intermediären Institutionen*, Gütersloh 1998).

preference for an indirect style of moral communication. Such a style will be preferred in all communication outside the home milieus of the individuals. Furthermore, one might speculate that under certain conditions this style would diffuse into moral communication even into home milieus.

It should be remembered that indirect moralizing did not first emerge in modern society. It appears, however, that in various types of non-modern societies such a style arose only under special conditions and only in certain milieus and that it was limited to a few kinds of communicative situations. In modern societies, on the other hand, it seems to have come to mark most "inter-milieu" communication and, as I just speculated, it is not entirely unlikely that this style has also spread beyond the interactional domain in which its adoption was favored by structural causes into much "intra-milieu" moralizing.

It should be also kept in mind that the guess about the predominance of indirect moralizing does not imply that in modern societies no one moralizes directly any more. It is likely that in groups and milieus in which moral homogeneity can be assumed by the participants in communicative interaction, there are no grounds to prefer indirect moralizing. Our findings support this assumption. An indirect style will be only employed if it diffuses into these groups or milieus for other reasons. There is some evidence for that in family communication and even in the religious television program that was investigated in our study. Although the main contours of the situation did emerge in our study, we did not have the broad sweep of data necessary to map out precisely the repertoires of different communicative milieus according to the predominance of direct and indirect styles of moralizing.

In non-modern societies families were communities of life in which a fairly high degree of moral homogeneity prevailed or could be at least assumed to prevail by those in a position of authority. In modern society this is no longer the case, and while a certain amount of direct moralizing is likely to occur wherever asymmetrical relationships still prevail (*e.g.*, between adults and very young children) and in symmetrical relationships between peers if they know each other well, generally, indirect moralizing will be probably preferred.

Communities of life such as the family are no longer necessarily communities of like-minded people (*Gesinnungsgemeinschaften*). At the same time, various kinds of communities of the latter kind proliferate in modern societies. Interactional risks of the kind described do not exist in them. It is only in external relations that moral homogeneity cannot be assumed. There, adherents of moral-ideological communities have two basic options. Either they adopt the indirect style in order to remain morally inconspicuous, or they accept the risk

and engage in direct moralizing, thereby becoming moral entrepreneurs, moral missionaries. However, genuine choice between the options may be open to members of *Gesinnungsgemeinschaften* only when they are alone in their interaction with non-members. It is likely that in the external collective activities of moral-ideological communities, at least of those belonging to a proselytizing type, the option to remain inconspicuous is not available. The group may expect and demand testimony.

Another aspect relevant to the situation is that in modern societies moral enterprises often do not present themselves as such. It seems that only the more traditional *Gesinnungsgemeinschaften*, especially those of a fundamentalist persuasion, are still willing to declare themselves. It is noteworthy that many of the newer moral-ideological communities follow a different strategy. Many of them put on scientific, medical, therapeutic, *etc.*, facades. On a structural level, this may be considered a form of indirection. However, indirect as such moralizing is, it remains a form of moral communication.

## APPENDIX: Examples of indirect moralizing

1. Why constructions (THE TELEPHONE OPERATOR)\* (\* indicates translation from German data)

S. calls information and asks for the phone number of a family called "Weisser" in Constance.

- 12 A I have no family WEISSER in Constance.  
 13 only a family WEISS  
 14 S: yes I think they live on the Reichenau  
 15 and actually not directly in Constance  
 16 A **(brusquely) WHY did you say CONSTANCE then**  
 17 S I am sorry I thought the Reichenau belongs to CONSTANCE  
 18 (2.5)  
 18  
 19 A: well then the number is

2. 'I don't understand' constructions (ANTJE AND PAUL)\*

- 1 A: ok good, but it doesn't get you anywhere if you  
 2 P: [haja]  
 3 it won't get me anywhere but  
 4 A: if you think about now you just have to first of all see  
 5 how you can get your stuff put in order  
 6 hh I eh **I don't understand I don't understand** **either**  
 7 **why you just don't call** whatchamacallhim in Stuttgart  
 8 and say that when you do your practical semester now,  
 9 that you then would like to - next semester continue  
 10 in Stuttgart again

3. Reconstructions (direct / indirect example) (CHINESE STUDENT AND GERMAN LANGUAGE TEACHER)\*

- 86 Hu: then the secretary of the party at that time ya

- 87 S: [mhm]  
 88 Hu: confronted me  
 89 S: [mhm] (.....)  
 .  
 .  
 97 Hu: other people then, wanted to  
 98 confronted me. **WHY don't you ACT**  
 99 **like the others** like your fellow students  
 101 dress up so fancy  
 102 S ((filled with indignation)) oh yeah

#### 4. Litotes (WE GERMANS)\*

- 42 H: we Germans you have to look at it this way sometimes  
 43 **don't always** behave in just the right way  
 44 **it's not always very good**

#### 5. Overall indirect constructions (GENETIC COUNSELING)\*

- 23 KM we would like to have children ourselves  
 24 we actually like children: I like them and my wife  
 25 B: I think, well, I would actually  
 26 KM: I think  
 27 B: **see no reason that one would** for that reason  
 28 KM: hm.  
 29 B: go without children  
 30 KM: hm. (7.0) it was actually interesting that they ....

#### Other forms of indirectness and obliqueness

Euphemisms, disfluences, false starts, reformulations, jocular modulations, prosodic devices: (complaining tone, brusque tone *etc.* with semantically neutral, non-moralizing utterances).