Chapter 2
Human Culture(s) as Moral Order(s)

The ideas of culture and action are central in sociology and social theory. But what do we need from a theory of culture that will adequately explain human action and account for the complexities of the human experience? We need a theory of culture specifying the means by which people construct strategies of action, but also culture as providing the normative ends toward which people act. We need a theory of culture that recognizes the powerful influences on human action of forces that do not operate directly through human consciousness and intention, but also of forces that importantly motivate human action through consciously held ideas, beliefs, and commitments. And we need a theory of culture that accounts for the very real operation of rationally self-interested choice in human life, but also the pervasive and powerful human enacted affirmations of moral commitments that are not reducible to self-interest.

In what follows I argue that the most adequate approach to theorizing human culture must be a normative one that conceives of humans as moral, believing animals and human social life as consisting of moral orders that constitute and direct social action. Human culture is always moral order. Human cultures are everywhere moral orders. Human persons are nearly inescapably moral agents. Human actions are necessarily morally constituted and propelled practices. And human institutions are inevitably morally infused configurations of rules and resources.

Moral Animals

One of the central and fundamental motivations for human action is to act out and sustain moral order, which helps constitute, directs, and makes significant human life itself. Human persons nearly universally live in social worlds that are thickly webbed with moral assumptions, beliefs, commitments, and obligations. The relational ties that hold human lives together, the conversations that occupy people’s mental lives, the routines and intentions that shape their actions, the institutions within which they live and work, the emotions they feel every day—all of these and more are drenched in, patterned by, glued together with moral premises, convictions, and obligations. These morally constituted and permeated worlds exist outside of people, in structured social practices and relationships within which people’s lives are embedded. They also exist “inside” of people, in their assumptions, expectations, beliefs, aspirations, thoughts, judgments, and feelings. There is nowhere a human can go to escape moral order. There is no way to be human except through moral order.

What I mean by “moral,” to be clear, is an orientation toward understandings about what is right and wrong, good and bad, worthy and unworthy, just and unjust, that are not established by our own actual desires, decisions, or preferences but instead believed to exist apart from them, providing standards by which our desires, decisions, and preferences can themselves be judged.1 Human animals are moral animals in that we possess a capacity and propensity unique among all animals: we not only have desires, beliefs, and feelings (which often have strong moral qualities) but also the ability and disposition to form strong evaluations about our desires, beliefs, and feelings that hold the potential to transform them. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor refers to this as having “second order desires”—desires about our desires.2

Humans not only have the ability to hate, for instance, but also the ability to judge that our hatreds are wrong and to come to the place where we do not want any more to be hateful. It is not simply that we first hate and then our hatred fades. It is that even while we are still hating we can form the desire not to hate, because of evaluative judgments we make about our hate. Hatred is the first order desire, the wish not to hate is the second order desire—a desire about another desire.

Note that people do not always form second order desires, nor do they always succeed in achieving them when they do. Some people sometimes hate without compunction. Others who wish not to be hateful cannot move beyond their hatred. Still, people normally do incessantly make strong evaluations about their thoughts, emotions, and wants that have the potential to revise them on moral grounds. A
man may have an uncontrollably gluttonous desire to eat but may also feel profound shame for his complete lack of ingestive self-control (and not only his obesity), and so very strongly desires to become a person who is temperate and self-controlled in his eating. Likewise, a wife may no longer feel much love for her husband but believes for a variety of reasons that it is right to love him anyway (besides her not wishing to suffer the adverse consequences, such as divorce, of continuing not to love him) and so comes actually to desire to love her husband (even though she now does not) and then takes steps to try to rekindle her love for him. This process can engage beliefs as well as desires. For example, a white person who may have since childhood held deep down in his heart the racist belief that blacks and Hispanics are inferior to whites may have recently come to the conviction that racism is just plain wrong; in which case, he may then form the strong desire to get rid of the deep-seated racist beliefs that he knows he still in fact holds. All of these cases involve moral judgments of self—strong evaluations based on external standards of good and bad, right and wrong, virtue and vice, and so on, that transform the fundamental question from “What do I want?” and “How do I feel?” and “What do I believe?” into “What should I want?” and “How ought I to feel?” and “What is the right thing to believe?” Human collective moral order and action are founded on and sustain this distinctive human proclivity toward forming second order desires based on strong evaluations of first order desires, beliefs, and feelings. What I mean by “moral order,” to be explicit, is intersubjectively and institutionally shared social structurings of moral systems that are derived from the larger narratives and belief systems described in the following two chapters.

Thus when an action or order is moral, in this sense, it entails an imperative to affirm a commitment to shared rules or obligations that apply to people in certain defined situations and statuses. The moral also involves a sense of normative duty to express or perform obligations that are intrinsically motivated—because they are right, good, worthy, just, and so on—rather than motivated by the means/ends-oriented desire to obtain the benefit of consuming a good or service.3

The stranger thus acts morally when she finds on a deserted sidewalk a wallet full of lots of money, goes home, calls its owner, and returns the wallet with all of its contents. To do otherwise would itself be dishonest and uncaring—even if it would make her richer without anyone else knowing. The citizen acts morally when he gets up after dinner and goes out in the pouring rain to cast his vote as one among tens of millions of votes in an election. To do otherwise would be bad citizenship—even if in most cases his one vote could make no difference in any electoral outcome. In these and all like cases, actions are performed at least in part because they affirm and express commitments to what are understood to be right, good, worthy, just, and so on. And these are understood to entail imperatives independent of the actor’s own personal wishes and inclinations, and not because they might achieve some other valued outcome or benefit. The basic difference here in terms of philosophical ethics is between deontological and teleological ethical systems; virtue ethics also comports with the sense of morality I develop here, and so do, arguably, certain versions of non utilitarian consequentialist ethics.

But actions and practices are not all that are moral in human social life. Social institutions and cultural systems, the next section suggests, are also always moral in this sense. For the stranger returning a wallet full of money as an individual act is itself necessarily embedded within a larger shared cultural system specifying particular norms, values, virtues, ethics, and notions of the human good toward which any good person ought to aspire. The action of the good citizen who votes in every election no matter what the weather only makes sense within a larger institutional framework of political democracy that itself is constituted by normative definitions and beliefs about freedom, participation, self-governance, public virtue, political legitimacy, procedural fairness, and so on.

What I am claiming here is that to enact and sustain moral order is one of the central, fundamental motivations for human action;4 and that until this is recognized and built into our theories and analyses, our understanding of human action and culture will be impoverished.5

What I do not mean in saying that humans are motivated to enact and sustain moral order is that people always act morally, that they consistently live up to their own and others’ moral standards.
People clearly do not. In fact people can, for a variety of reasons, routinely violate all sorts of moral convictions and normative codes. To say that human persons are moral beings is a statement about an externally and subjectively patterned human situation, not a statement about consistent individual behavior within that situation.

Many cases of moral dereliction themselves typically reflect the functioning of a larger, intact, powerful moral order at work. For one thing, people often feel guilty about their wrongdoings, recognizing some moral culpability for failing to live up to moral standards. In so doing, they continue to live within, to reference, and to affirm backhandedly the validity of the larger moral order. Furthermore, certain moral compromises and failures are the outcomes of tensions between what are experienced as conflicting moral demands. A student lies to a teacher about her boyfriend painting graffiti on the wall because she thinks it is (morally) wrong for girlfriends to betray boyfriends’ trust in that way. A father repeatedly breaks his promises to come see his daughter’s soccer games because he feels compelled to fulfill his obligations as a good employee at work to ensure that he will always be the good provider for his family that he believes he should be.

This is not to say that rationalizations and self-deceptions are not also often at work in these cases; simply that violations of morals, rather than negating the reality of moral order, often transpire with reference to the constraints and contradictions of complex moral systems. Otherwise, we would have no concept or practice of rationalization itself. For people only ever need to rationalize behaviors when they and their audiences share understandings of moral orders within which their behaviors are questionable. A CEO may choose to lay off four hundred employees one week before Christmas because it will play very well for his career at the all-important February board of trustees meeting; yet he tells himself and his tennis partner that this is really, if unfortunately, the right thing to do since it will consolidate company strength and create more jobs over the long run. Why? Only because this CEO lives within and to some extent must live up to a normative order that says that a good person does not put others out of jobs just before Christmas. If many people did not significantly truly believe in such moral orders, they would never feel the need to rationalize.

Moreover, some actions that violate shared standards of morality result partly from the disjunct between the external and subjective aspects of moral order. An eighteen-year-old boy has sex with his drunk and reluctant fifteen-year-old date (violating statutory rape laws and norms against date rape) not simply because of raw, hormonal sex drive but also because he actually believes, in a complex adolescent moral order of romance and sex, that she had provocatively “led him on” in a way that gave him the (moral) right to have her. Internalized moral orders do not perfectly mirror external moral orders, so actions based on normative assumptions operating at one level can work to violate norms at another level. In some cases, gross moral violations may actually reflect the faithful upholding of alternative moral orders. For example, a brutal revenge murder by mob hit men set in motion by a Mafia family is not likely to be a random act of irrationality or a mere instrumental move to secure material advantage. Rather, it is the discharging of solemn duties to uphold a certain moral order involving honor, self-respect, and vindication. The majority of us may abhor the Mafia’s particular moral order (as we do the date rape)—because we live within other moral orders—but that does not alter the morally charged character of the revenge murder or the normatively informed motivations of those who ordered it.

There may be very rare exceptions to the morally constituted and infused character of human persons: the relatively few people we call sociopaths, or psychopaths—those who have the clinical diagnosis “antisocial personality disorder.” These people lack consciences, routinely disregard social norms, feel no empathy for others, and are treacherously manipulative, destructive, and remorseless for the damage they inflict on others. Sociopaths are people who seem to live amoral lives, who cannot or will not recognize that they inhabit a shared moral order that makes binding claims on them (although they do often closely follow their own rules, their own moral orders). Notorious among these are Ted Bundy and Charles Manson. For my purposes, however, it is important to see that sociopaths are exceptions that
prove the rule about human moral order. We label them as sick, as abnormal, as repulsive deviants. When their remorselessly destructive ways become publicly known, we feel deep revulsion for them and lock them behind bars. We know that something has gone very deeply wrong with their humanity, that even though they are genetically human, they have become in a sense somehow something less than human. Thus while individual persons without any shared moral compass or conscience occasionally can and do surface in society, we experience them as somehow inhuman, as outside the bounds of humanity. And the complex machinery of the larger human moral order within which the sociopath lives then moves to capture, judge, and cage or kill them. And what remains intact as normal and controlling is the thickly webbed moral world of human society.

It is useful in this discussion not to confuse morality with “altruism.” In the course of background research for writing this essay, I studied a number of social psychology textbooks, where I was surprised to discover little if any attention paid to morality or moral order. Social psychology, it appears, has no clue about humans as moral animals but appears to prefer to think of humans as mere cognitive information processors. Close scrutiny of their tables of contents and indexes yields few if any references to morality. Most texts, however, did devote—in what seemed to be a spirit of obligatory coverage—one page or two to the subject of altruism. Do people ever sacrifice their own interests for the welfare of others? If so, what kind of people, and under what conditions do they do so? The typical textbook example focused on those who risked their own safety to rescue Jews from the Nazis. However interesting studies of altruism are, and however important it is to establish that humans can and do act altruistically, morality in the ways I am discussing it here cannot be reduced to altruism. Altruism, among humans at least, is a particular attitudinal and behavioral expression of a certain kind of moral commitment that becomes relevant in specific situations within systems of moral order. But morality, as described here, is much bigger, thicker, and more complex than mere altruism. Most versions of human altruism could not exist without morality. But there are all kinds of moral beliefs, judgments, and actions that are not particularly altruistic. One’s actions can be normatively directed in many ways without the action being self-sacrificial. One can live in relation to what one understands to be the good, the right, the true, the just without that always involving the selfless concern for others’ welfare. To suppose then that taking morality seriously essentially means paying closer attention to altruism both unrealistically raises the bar on and drastically narrows the range of what might count as moral.

Human emotions provide excellent telltale indicators of the moral assumptions, convictions, and expectations that pervade and order our personal and collective lives. A son feels guilt for not taking care of his ailing, aged mother in a way he knows a good son should. A wife feels annoyed that her husband spends the weekend watching sports on television when he could be painting the house or talking with her about her week. A grandfather feels deeply thankful at his youngest granddaughter’s baptism, knowing that his family is turning out just right. An employee feels angry for not getting the raise she thought her boss had promised and that she clearly deserves. The party host feels embarrassed in front of their guests by the rude misbehavior shown by their teenage kids. A clique of university students is elated to hear that the professor they had for a class who was a terrible lecturer and an unfair grader was denied tenure. A parent is outraged on learning that her school district hired a felon for a janitor without first checking on his record and references. A father feels profound contentment when his daughter eagerly takes over the family business that he started and built up over the last thirty-five years. A girl feels betrayed when she learns that the boy she was dating “exclusively” has also been seeing another girl. Passersby feel indifferent to a homeless beggar they suspect is a self-destructive drug addict. A religious group is offended when leaders of another religion organize to proselytize its members. A nation’s people is shocked by the unprovoked attack of a neighboring country and rallies to prepare for war. These emotions and most others are signs of moral orders fulfilled and moral orders violated. They serve as clues of often unarticulated, assumed beliefs about and commitments to normative expectations embedded in larger moral systems within which people make sense of and live out their lives.
Human social life is well understood as the “liturgy” of moral order. Religious liturgies—as with, for instance, the liturgical worship styles of the Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican churches—are the collective enactments, the dramatic ritualizations of the theological stories of faith traditions. Liturgy is the work of a congregation that expresses, performs, and represents a sacred narrative through song, prayer, reading, confession, consecration, proclamation, procession, silence, kneeling, standing, candle lighting, incense burning, bread breaking, and more. Liturgy ritually reenacts a tradition, an experience, a history, a worldview. It expresses in dramatic and corporeal form a sacred belief system in words, music, imagery, aromas, tastes, and bodily movement. In liturgy, worshipers both perform and observe, act out truth and have the truth act on them, remember the past and carry it into the future. Liturgy expresses, professes, performs, and informs. This is what religious liturgies do. It is also exactly what human social life more generally does with cultural moral order. All of the social practices, relations, and institutions that comprise human social life generally themselves together dramatize, ritualize, proclaim, and reaffirm the moral order that constitutes social life. Moral order embodies the sacred story of the society, however profane it appears, and the social actors are believers in social congregation. Together they remember, recite, represent, and reaffirm the normative structure of their moral order. All of the routines, habits, and conventions of micro interaction ritualize what they know about the good, the right, the true, the just. All of the systems and structures of macro institutional life do likewise. This is simply the way of moral, believing animals.

The ethnomethodological experiments of the sociologist Harold Garfinkel and his followers in the 1960s and 1970s are just one example that makes this clear. Garfinkel was interested in the delicate order of human micro interactions, particularly the precarious yet resilient interactional structures that regulate interpersonal conversations. Garfinkel and his students uncovered the standards and boundaries of these orders through the use of “breaching experiments” that intentionally violated the norms and conventions of conversation in order to observe people’s responses. On the phone, for example, when people said, “Hello, how are you?” the ethnomethodologists replied, “What do you mean, ‘How am I’?” At first, people quickly worked to repair the breakdown, but the ethnomethodologists continued to refuse to cooperate. What they discovered in the process was not only how easily simple conversations can be disrupted but how vehemently people reacted to these disruptions. At first, their interaction partners were simply completely confused. Rather quickly, however, they became hostile, indignant, angry. “What do you mean, ‘What do you mean, “How am I”? What is your problem!?” People, Garfinkel reports, were not simply frustrated, they were outraged. For, we can observe, their elementary rules facilitating the enactment of moral order were being violated. Garfinkel was not only being difficult; he was interrupting and desecrating the liturgy of social life. What he did was sociologically parallel to standing up in the middle of Catholic mass to burp loudly and shout obscenities. It was simply something nobody does, and when Garfinkel did, it incurred people’s wrath.

One of the well-known moves that neoclassical economics and social exchange and rational choice theories make is to shift analytical attention away from variability in people’s “preferences and values” and to focus instead on the rationally calculated choices of self-interested actors. Either people’s preferences are assumed to be stable and common (i.e., to maximize material gain) or they are readily bracketed off from investigation with the simple phrase “given people’s values and preferences…” A standard critique of these approaches that I reiterate here is that social science simply cannot neglect preferences and values. For one thing, they clearly are not stable and common. For another, they simply cannot be bracketed as an analytical “given.” If anything, it is the rationality, calculation, and choice that might be bracketed from analysis, since the real variance and interesting explanatory punch is so often not found there but in the variance in preferences, values, and commitments of the actors. And this is why finally any good sociological analysis is and needs self-consciously to be a cultural sociology.”

Even purely quantitative sociology using advanced statistical techniques must finally engage in cultural sociology, insofar as for quantitative sociology to make any sense, the meaning and effects of its variables must in the end be explained and interpreted in terms of their cultural significance and...
influence in social life—“findings” and tables are always followed by “discussion,” which nearly always relies, at least implicitly, on cultural interpretation. Sex, education, income, race, region, marital status, religion, neighborhood composition, and nearly every other variable in bivariate tables and multivariate models are usually social facts that significantly associate with social effects because of the cultural meanings they have in people’s lives and the social influences they therefore exert. Indeed, it is precisely the job of cultural analysis in these cases, whether done persuasively or badly, and consciously so or not, to turn observed significant associations into plausible causal influences in the minds of journal article readers.

For my purposes, however, the key point is more specific than this broad claim. It is that preferences and valuings are typically and perhaps nearly always powerfully shaped by, if not derived from, larger systems of moral order. Preferences are not primarily self-referential inclinations. And values are not abstract, free-floating personal appraisals. Both preferences and values involve reference to discriminations between worthy and unworthy, good and bad, right and wrong, truth and falsehood, and so on. They are socially normative and evaluative dispositions. Few people value individual freedom, for example, simply because they personally and idiosyncratically so happen to value it. People value freedom because they are embedded in a larger moral order that specifies what is good, right, true, just, and worthy in the context of which freedom is prized. Note that not all people in history or across cultures have valued or do value individual freedom as many Americans, for example, do. That is because they inhabit other, different moral orders within which freedom is less highly regarded. Likewise, some people’s preference for lethargic beach vacations spent basking in the sun and sipping margaritas—as opposed to, say, vacations spent scaling mountain peaks or gambling at Vegas or in social service projects in poor communities—are not random, contextless fancies. Rather, the lazy beach vacation preference is generated by and draws meaning from a larger moral order specifying a particular account of “the good life” involving particular normative notions of self, health, work, leisure, pleasure, and reward. In sum, explaining differences in preferences and values is a crucial element of sociological analysis, and preferences and values can only be explained in terms of the moral orders from which they arise, in which they are embedded, and that suffuse them with meaning.

Here is precisely the point where we can observe the trouble that some social scientists have run into in the use of the idea of social norms. In some cases, scholars have employed the idea of norms as if they were free-floating bits of behavioral expectations governing self and others. Jon Elster, for instance, writes persuasively on social norms in *The Cement of Society* that certain human actions simply cannot be explained as intending to minimize costs and maximize benefits to self. Rather, he argues, some types of action are clearly norm following.9 That is an important observation. Yet Elster leaves the reader with the impression that norms are essentially autonomous packets of action-directives, rather arbitrary and specific instructions that specify very particular lines of action. One simply does not ask one’s adult neighbor whether they would be willing to mow one’s lawn for pay. One does not flagrantly pick one’s nose in public, even in front of complete strangers who cannot sanction you and whom you will never see again. One does not walk up to someone waiting in line to purchase theater tickets and offer to buy their place in line. “It simply isn’t done,” Elster observes. But what Elster appears to be missing in this otherwise persuasive exposition is the degree to which social norms are tied to larger moral orders in relation to which they make sense and carry influence. He quite frankly confesses, “I cannot offer a positive explanation of norms. I do not know why human beings have a propensity to construct and follow norms, nor how specific norms come into being.” Although it might not be obvious on the surface, I suggest that discrete social norms are usually linked to larger, complicated normative systems that carry some weight of history and tradition, that are meaningful in terms of some believed narrative.

Most people avoid indiscreetly picking their noses on the subway, for instance, not because some arbitrary and free-floating bit of behavioral directive for whatever reason says not to. Rather, they do not pick their noses because their lives are embedded in and carried along by what Norbert Elias has shown
is a much larger civilizing process that has developed culturally over many centuries in the West that elaborates a complex normative order of dignity, privacy, propriety, and shame that profoundly governs the comportment of our public lives. If so, one of the jobs of sociologists must be not simply to demonstrate the continued influence of social norms in human action but to explicate the cultural history, substance, texture, and significance of the larger, more complex moral orders within which specific social norms are generated and operate.

**Morally Animated Institutions**

One of the long-standing false dichotomies in sociological theory has been “culture” versus “society”—the intangible ideas, values, and beliefs of a people (culture) counterposed against supposedly more real or hard social institutions (society). This ultimately unhelpful distinction has closely paralleled other false dichotomies in social theory: agency versus structure, freedom versus constraint, ideal versus material. These mistaken distinctions have generated endless arguments between idealists and materialists, culturalists and structuralists, humanists and determinists, and more.

Fortunately, social theory in recent years has seen a tremendously helpful rethinking of these issues. This reconsideration has invalidated many of the old, misleading dichotomies by showing how thoroughly cultural social structures and institutions are and how entirely dependent on material resources culture is. Particularly helpful in this matter have been the separate works of Anthony Giddens and William H. Sewell Jr. They conceive of social structures as complex systems of rules and resources (Giddens) or schema and resources (Sewell). This means that society and all of its institutions and structures are always constituted in part by mental categories and maps that serve as cultural classifications that order the distribution and deployment of resources. Of course, the rules or schema are also themselves significantly shaped by the distribution of resources, since ideas are not free-floating entities but require institutions to sustain and promote them. But what is clearly not the case is the old idea that society and institutions are somehow real, hard, substantial, determinative while ideas, beliefs, and consciousness are somehow more ephemeral, superficial, and derivative. Every version of the classical infrastructure-superstructure distinction is a false dichotomy. Instead, every social system, structure, and institution is always and necessarily constituted and defined by cultural rules or schemas that make it more or less meaningful and legitimate; and every cultural rule or schema depends on systems of material and nonmaterial resources to be sustained. Thus society apart from culture, if that is even possible to imagine, is like the body without a living spirit (for those still able to think in those terms)—it is dead, an empty array of objects without any purpose, orienting motivation, or legitimacy.

What these theoretical insights help us to see, for the purposes of this essay, is the intimate connection between moral order and social institutions. The moral is not simply a subjective concern limited to religion, ethical rules, or personal values. Nor are institutions merely practical arrangements for the accomplishing of functional tasks, like delivering health care and making political decisions. Rather, social institutions are always morally animated enterprises. All social institutions are embedded within and give expression to moral orders that generate, define, and govern them. Whether it is obvious on surface appearances or not, social institutions are inevitably rooted in and expressions of the narratives, traditions, and worldviews of moral orders.

Universities, for example, are not simply practical systems for producing research findings and increasing human capital in students in order functionally to strengthen a state’s economy. Universities are more fundamentally stable configurations of resources (buildings, personnel, budgets, reputations, and so on) grounded in and reproducing moral order. American universities, for instance, are expressive incarnations of certain moral narratives, traditions, and commitments concerning the good, the right, and the true regarding human development, student character, the nature of knowledge, the purposes of education, equality and merit, academic freedom, liberal arts and technical training, racial justice, gender relations, socioeconomic background, collegial decision-making, the place of the arts, the limits of religion, the informed consent of human subjects, the value of sports, and so on. And these, of course, are themselves rooted in even deeper moral traditions and worldviews about the nature of human
personhood, epistemologies, historical progress, liberty and equality, legitimate authority, and more. It does not matter that some students, faculty, administrators, or trustees may not understand their universities as grounded in and expressive of particular moral order. It does not normally even matter that some or many of them may actually disagree with the moral traditions, narratives, or worldviews animating their university. For these individuals are embedded in the larger institution whose purpose it is to express and reproduce the moral order that animates it, which is older and bigger than any individual or group of individuals. The institution lives on, more thoroughly shaping people in its image than being reshaped by movements of people’s alternative moral imaginations.

The same case could be made of all other social institutions, including those involving politics, courtship, marriage, family, law, science, health care, the media, education, recreation, the military, social services, business and industry, or any other socially structured human activity. Behind, beneath, in, and through all of the institutions involved in these human practices are moral orders rooted in historical narratives, traditions, and worldviews that orient human actors to the good, the right, the true. For human persons are fundamentally and inescapably moral and believing animals who cannot grow, live, or act apart from moral bearings. Sometimes the moral order animating institutions becomes too big, too dominant, too obvious to recognize—even, or perhaps especially, for educated, modern people. But this does not mean moral order is not operative, rather that it is all the more powerfully operative.

But surely, some may protest, the capitalist marketplace at least is a sphere of human activity devoid of moral consideration and governance. In it individuals calculate, bargain, buy, and sell only to maximize their material self-interest. The market is all and only about free exchange and economic profit. And the laws of supply and demand are so bloodless that the “creative destruction” of market capitalism is often cruel and ruthless. Where is there any moral order in that? In fact, numerous observers have shown definitively that market capitalism too is thoroughly engendered by and expressive of moral order. The capitalist market is no neutral space or amoral institution. It presumes a particular, normative notion of human persons as basically rational, materially acquisitive, and self-interested. It stakes out a particular moral position on matters of human need, responsibility, equality, freedom, welfare, and merit. It is linked to specific normative commitments about property ownership, entrepreneurial initiative, the deferred gratification of consumption, and often liberal democracy. Furthermore, the market is no self-generating, autonomous entity but only exists because (morally animated) political, legal, and regulatory structures and interventions sustain it—just as these were also required to sustain other kinds of economic systems throughout history. So a landlord may feel that morality has nothing to do with his renting a house in the mountains to a wealthy couple to use it occasionally as a summer cottage rather than to a struggling, poor, local family who desperately needs shelter. But in fact a particular moral order most definitely animates the market institution within which his seemingly amoral action makes sense. And it is a moral order tied to specific, historical, normative traditions, narratives, and worldviews—especially Anglo, liberal individualism. All this becomes more obvious when one considers the particular alternative moral orders that have historically animated quite different economic institutions—for instance, lord-and-serf feudalism, colonial imperialism, communism, mercantilism, and slave-based economies—that are based on and express quite different moral notions of the state, human freedom, individual rights and responsibilities, the moral purposes of wealth, and so on.

But surely science at least is different from these other institutions? Science cannot be an incarnation of moral order, for morality is historical, particularistic, partial, and committed, whereas science is objective, universal, and based on fact, not faith. Is not science the one method that transcends human beliefs and biases and provides rational and impartial truth about reality? A seventeenth-century Hopi Native American might not think so. Neither might a Hindu monk living in Calcutta. Neither, for that matter, might have Albert Einstein. Without belaboring the point, suffice it to say that—for all the knowledge about the material and human world that science has generated, which has enhanced our technological ability to manipulate the living and inorganic world and alter our material standard of
living—modern, Western science, like all institutions, is a set of practices that developed out of and express a distinct moral order comprising particular, historical narratives, traditions, and worldviews.

It clearly is grounded on and perpetuates particular assumptions and commitments—about matter, causality, regularity, human sensory observation, quantification, and much more—that science itself cannot possibly justify and that have not been self-evident to all rational people everywhere at all times. Science is also driven by distinct moral notions about what a good human life looks like, the nature and value of progress, the ethics of alliances with government and industry, the limits of its own moral culpability (for example, in developing weapons of mass destruction or cloning human beings), and so on. Science as we know it can only ever proceed by first placing faith in a set of unprovable cosmological, metaphysical, and epistemological assumptions and commitments. And science as we know it proceeds by hitching its wagon to a set of nineteenth-century general assumptions about civilization, progress, knowledge, and morality. Science may have put a man on the moon (which was itself a morally, politically, and emotionally pregnant endeavor). But we cannot say that science is exempt from the moral and believing character of human persons and society. Nothing human, not even science, escapes moral order.

One of the best ways to reveal the moral character of social institutions, as noted earlier, is to violate moral norms and observe the reactions. One quickly learns that one is not simply proposing an alternative idea but has profaned a moral commitment of sacred character. Try, for example, proposing that all American state university course curricula include teachings from the Bible relevant to each course’s subject. Or try arguing among social scientists that empirically observed socioeconomic disparities between racial and ethnic groups are actually the result of inherent group genetic differences that determine one group to be better and more successful than another. Or venture to advocate that, in the interest of long-term societal well-being and rational human evolution, the government should systematically employ material incentives and forced sterility and abortions to limit the fertility of couples who have low IQs or physical blemishes or who belong to a particular religion or ethnicity. Or suggest in the lab that the research team starts each day by praying to the Creator for supernaturally provided insight into the problem under investigation. At first you may be amusingly dismissed as nuts, unworthy of a serious response. But if your suggestion happens to come to be perceived as serious and as garnering some legitimacy, then agents of the relevant moral order will come down on you with fierce emotion and retribution to eradicate the desecrating offense to the moral order. This is simply the nature of social institutions grounded in the moral and sustained by animals who are most fundamentally moral and believing.

**Some Implications**

What all of this means for a theory of culture is that the moral order that motivates and shapes human action is not merely something internalized through socialization. Human action is wrongly understood as simply the external behavioral product, operating in neutral social space, of individuals’ internal programming, directives, or specified ends. Rather, the moral order that generates and guides human action permeates all aspects of the social order within which human lives are embedded and from which human animals draw their identities and capacities. Moral order permeates human existence. It suffuses the structured configurations of resources and practices that comprise our organizations and institutions. Moral order is thus woven into, indeed defines, the very woven patterns of the social fabric itself. All of this then positions moral order as external to and objectively existent for human actors. At the same time, however, precisely because human actors are constituted, developed, propelled, and guided by the social institutions in which their lives are embedded, the moral orders animating social institutions also find imperfectly corresponding expression within human actors—in the assumptions, ideas, values, beliefs, volitions, emotions, and so on of human subjectivity, conscience, consciousness, and self-consciousness. The human actors who both produce and are produced by social institutions thus engage moral order both objectively and subjectively. And the moral orders both inside and outside of human
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persons reflect and reproduce each other. This duality is lived in practice through a unified process that is historical, dialectical, and reciprocally self-reinforcing.

I have just spoken of the imperfect character of the internally corresponding expression of institutional moral order in human subjectivity. By this I recognize the recurrent disjunct between the moral orders animating social institutions and those that individuals internalize through socialization. There is a definite and strong correspondence between the two, but a correspondence that is nevertheless imperfect and somewhat mismatched. This is so for three reasons. The first is that any single moral order never develops in complete and seamless unity.

There are always, as Sewell has pointed out, intellectual and practical cracks, loose ends, unclear boundaries, implementation difficulties, tensions, incongruities, and contradictions that beset any discrete system of moral order. Never do the pieces of humanly constructed systems—however rational, systematic, or elegant—all fit together neatly and completely. There is therefore always room for wiggling, maneuvering, doubts, challenges, misunderstandings, and the consideration of and, possibly, conversion to alternative moral orders. Thus even as intellectually tight a theological system as Calvinism, for example, has various weak spots, unanswered questions, problematic implications, and— we know—defectors to Arminianism, Unitarianism, Deism, and various forms of secular political activism.

Second, rarely does any human social order encompass only one system of moral order. More likely, any conglomeration of social institutions that comprise what we call “society” are animated by many competing and blended moral orders. American culture, for example, has been observed to be an odd mingling of the biblical tradition, a republican tradition, utilitarian individualism, and expressive individualism—which together clash and amalgamate to produce the interesting Christian-capitalist-democratic-romanticist-libertarian-secular thing that is the United States. Some moral orders tend to be restrictive and discriminating in relation to others, while yet others can be quite promiscuous. But no moral order is entirely impervious to the influence of other moral orders with which it comes into contact. And this helps to create another level of tension, instability, and contradiction within and between the moral orders that animate human social life.

The third reason for the imperfect correspondence between institutional and socialized moral order brings us back to our model of human personhood. At issue is more than simply the intrinsic limits or multiplicity of moral orders as cultural entities. Again, human motivation, action, and personhood themselves matter here. Part of the reason why the moral orders internalized “inside” of people do not entirely match the moral orders constituting and embedded in the institutions outside of and encompassing those people is that animals that are moral and believing actively participate in their own socialization, as discriminating agents who judge, embrace, reject, and modify. The consciousness and self-consciousness that place moral belief at the center of human action also give rise to capacities for human creativity and discrimination that help to constitute human persons as active subjects with agency. As self-conscious animals, humans are able to “step back” from and develop alternative and creative perspectives on moral orders and institutions, even those that beget and envelop their very own lives. To do otherwise would be less than human. As moral agents, humans are able and often compelled to consider, to evaluate, to judge the goodness, truth, and rightness of the moral orders they are taught by socializers to subjectively embrace. To do otherwise would again be less than human. The very “nature” of human personhood modeled here, therefore, explains why people are never mere “cultural dopes,” why socialization is never entirely effective or complete, and why humanly intended social change can and does happen. For moral and believing animals are also necessarily creative and discriminating animals who find themselves with sufficient (but not absolute) “distance” in consciousness from both their own selves and from that around them which is not their selves, to be able to exercise their wills in the making of meaningful, if constrained, choices about the moral order or orders to which they will commit their lives—that is to say, choices about who they will become and therefore how they will spend
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their lives. Something like this is what provides the basis for believing in the moral responsibility of sentient human persons that is essential to successful humanistic (if not all) legal and social systems.

Notice, however, that in this model, no human ever entirely transcends or successfully “digs below” the particularistic, historical narratives and traditions that comprise any moral order, in order to arrive at either an objective “view from nowhere” or some indubitable, universal foundation of knowledge and judgment. That impossible Enlightenment aspiration, we increasingly realize, was in many cases a self-deceived conceit of some self-divinizing intellectuals inebriated with their belief of having finally thrown God out of the universe. In fact, all any human person has ever had or has to work from are the materials of the historically relative, particular narratives and traditions available to him or her in his or her place on earth and in history. However, human persons also normally have some capacity to gain some critical distance and comparative perspective—even while always operating within the limits of available moral orders—which creates some degree of decision, of creativity, of agency in the formation of the self in relation to moral order. And it is this that keeps people from being cultural dopes, from perfectly internalizing through socialization the external system, from always only reproducing the existing social order.

There is of course much more that might be said about moral orders and people’s relations to them. A more fully developed account, for one thing, would further elaborate on the troubled, conflicted, and rebellious human impulses toward moral order. Human life is not a simple story of smooth and happy fulfillment of moral imperatives. People often struggle mightily at different levels to come to grips with the moral orders they inhabit and enact. There is in human life, besides our profound dependence on and enthusiasm for moral order, a simultaneous element of chronic discontent with moral order, of sometimes desperate impulses to resist and escape it. The best of saints as well as sinners can live bedeviled and anguished lives, in part because of the sometimes torturous pressures and complicated obligations that our inescapable moral condition generates. No doubt the life of the subconscious plays an important role in much of this struggle, resistance, and agony as well.

A more fully developed account would also need to elaborate on the realities of power and social conflict, which normative theories of culture have often been criticized for neglecting. The moral order perspective suggested in these pages can ably comprehend and explain power and social conflict. Moral orders empower. They generate and organize resources and agency for accomplishing their aims. Moral orders also make contending claims against rivals that structure and mobilize social division and conflict. The very creation of difference, valuation, and judgment at the heart of moral ordering not only provides meaning and direction to human existence, but also is precisely that which generates and sustains the distinctions, hierarchies, and inequalities that pervade human social life. Thus any analysis of social stratification or oppression can and finally must reference the thickly moral character of human persons and social structures as described in these pages. All of these are issues and dynamics that continued scholarship pursuing the “moral, believing animals” perspective described here will need more fully to explore and develop.

The approach offered in the previous pages helps us to avoid a number of besetting missteps in cultural theory. It enables us to speak of internally motivated, purposive human action without falling into the oversimplifications inherent in the Parsonian view of culture as instilling in actors the ends of action. It justifies our taking a strong position on the power and importance of socialization in social reproduction, without conceiving of those socialized as passive recipients of cultural norms, values, and ends—since they are always both the objects and subjects of their own socialization. It allows us to think about society as truly having an ordered cultural system, without supposing that such a system is unified, consensual, well bounded, and always integrating. The model of human personhood and culture outlined here also enables us to recognize and analyze the externally constraining influence of culture, without losing sight of the simultaneous internally motivating dimension of culture. Moreover, this model conceives of culture in a way that allows it both to provide instrumental tools for accomplishing purposive ends and to define purposes of human action themselves in relation to the right, true, and good
of a moral order or orders. Such a model likewise allows us to speak of the ("habitus"-like)\textsuperscript{18} subconscious, unintentional, and institutional-practice aspects of culture’s role in social reproduction, without losing the creative and purposive dimensions of reproduction and transformation as well. Finally, the model described here provides an account for notions of human freedom and responsibility that does not lapse into liberal (e.g., Rawlsian) political theory’s make-believe notions of individual autonomy and self-determined moral agency.

And finally, what of rational self-interest? Any social theory that fails to account for the reality of human self-centeredness and self-regarding choice-making will not get far. Most, if not arguably all, people turn out to have a propensity toward self-centeredness and often subtle and overt tendencies toward sheer selfishness, far exceeding what many optimistic, modern views of humanity are comfortable admitting. And this endemic human self-centeredness manifests itself pervasively in social life, a reality for which social theory has to account. Nevertheless, it is helpful to register a few points here that might shape our theorizing on this matter.

First, it is not obvious that human selfishness is conceptually identical to the rational pursuit of self-interest. Being a selfishly oriented person does not automatically make one an economics textbook model of the rationally calculating, strategic, ends-oriented, maximizing actor. There are many ways to live a self-centered life, not all of which embody \textit{Homo economicus}.

Second, even if human self-centeredness is pervasive and powerful, that does not automatically mean that self-interest is the only or even central motive for human action. People may and, I suggest, normally do act based on a variety of competing and complementary motives, not all of which are reducible to strict self-interest.\textsuperscript{19} For this reason, very often people’s self-interests (at least understood in terms that make reasonable sense to think of them that way) are often overridden by motivations springing from their moral commitments that are irreducible to self-interest. This is not to suggest that the world is populated by saints and angels, simply that even the kind of animals humans actually are turn out simply not always to act entirely or perhaps even primarily according to self-interested motives. Which is a good thing for us all, in the long run.

Third, there are very few, if any, culturally unmediated human interests, at least of the sort that proximately motivate action. What may be in the interest of a human self is rarely if ever a fixed, predetermined, common entity. Rather, interests are powerfully constituted, bounded, and directed by larger moral orders. Thus we humans may have fundamental interests in, say, individual and kin survival and enjoying physical and psychological pleasures. But these hardly tell us much specific about how to live our lives, any more than the physiological need to eat determines whether what you will have for dinner tonight will include steak, snake, bean sprouts, rotted fish (a delicacy in ancient Rome), or deep-fried, live baby chicks (a delicacy in parts of China). By the time elemental human interests get worked out in actual, lived human action, they have inevitably and thoroughly been defined, interpreted, and guided by culturally specific normative categories and directives. Thus “self-interest” can hardly explain human action apart from the thick moral orders of the cultural realm that mediate them and so hardly provides an adequate keystone on which to rest social theory. Rather, it is moral order that merits our greatest theoretical and analytical attention.

Finally, to the extent that people today actually do act clearly in the pursuit of rational self-interest, they do so much less as a reflection of some innate, natural impulse and much more in conformity with a socially and historically particular moral order that tells them that the way they \textit{should} act is precisely in a rationally self-interested manner. Rational self-interest ultimately does have moorings in some elemental features of the human condition. But to get from them to consistent, rationally self-interested action in observable, everyday life involves heavy doses of socialization into the moral orders of market capitalism, liberal democracy, and Western individualism. Thus most of what any of us commonly conduct or witness as rationally self-interested behavior is itself largely following the dictates of the particular moral order that we just so happen to usually take for granted as natural, even though it is in fact constructed and particular. In which case, rational choice theory does not trump a normative theory
of culture by reducing and reinterpreting the variety and complexity of human motivations into the singular motive of rational self-interest. Rather, if anything, a normative or moral theory of culture, such as the one suggested here, reinterprets rational choice theory as describing one particular mode of human motivation and action that reflects and embodies a specific moral order situated in a particular place in history and culture.

Addendum: Why Are Humans Moral Animals?

Why are humans apparently unique among all animals in being profoundly moral animals? It may be impossible to answer this question definitively, but it is worth considering. Some people will say that humans are uniquely moral animals because they are made “in the image” of a personal, moral God, who created them uniquely to reflect, know, and obey God. Other people will say that humans are moral because of the relatively large brains our species acquired through evolutionary development, which are neurologically capable of depths and complexities of evaluation and emotion unavailable to smaller brained animals. Maybe one or the other of these accounts is right, or maybe both are right.

Yet another account of human morality that does not seem to work, however, is the sociobiological (and, more recently, evolutionary psychology) explanation claiming that humans are moral because being so has had the effect of increasing their reproductive fitness. In this view, those protohumans that possessed a genetic disposition toward moral action, or that by chance learned to act morally, proved more fit in survival and natural selection. Such morality is said to have promoted the kind of cooperation and functional self-sacrifice that, in certain situations, may have increased the protohuman’s capacity, or perhaps that of his or her kin or tribe, to survive. The gene pools of those with moral propensities prevailed, then, while those without died off, leaving the descendants of the more fit (us) with selected-on “moral genes” that now govern our consciousness and behavior. Thus “the perception that morality exists is an epigenetic manifestation of our genes, which so manipulate humans as to make them believe that some behaviors are morally ‘good’ so that people behave in ways that are good for their genes.”

But sociobiological and evolutionary psychology accounts are beset with a number of significant—and, in my view, fatal—problems. This essay can obviously only begin to suggest sociobiology and evolutionary psychology’s problems and casts a vote more than it offers a definitive critique, toward which many others have already contributed. First, such explanations invariably reduce the rich and complex character of human morality to the single dimension of “altruism.” What they mean by altruism is something like “any act that increases the reproductive potential of another organism relative to the actor’s own potential.” This flattens and distorts the multidimensional reality of morality discussed in this essay, leaving as a remainder an emaciated concept. Indeed, by sociobiologists’ own admission, this definition would allow that having a genetic predisposition to have bad teeth would be altruistic, since that would cause that organism to eat less food, leaving more food for others to consume. This points out the problem, among many others, that the logic of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology lacks an adequate appreciation for conscious human intentions in moral action.

But even if we grant its shriveled image of morality, the sociobiological and evolutionary psychology account has difficulty explaining the many empirical cases of altruism to non-kin. If sacrificing oneself for the welfare of others consistently increased one’s own reproductive fitness, then sociology’s account would work. But self-sacrifice normally decreases one’s reproductive fitness, lessening, in small and sometimes big ways, the chances of survival. Sociobiologists have therefore answered that problem by introducing the idea of “inclusive fitness.” Their proposal is essentially that—since the true “actors” in this process are “selfish genes” and not the organisms that carry them—what really matters is the survival of one’s genetic material, which one shares in various proportions with one’s kin, more than one’s own bodily self as a living organism. So, just as a honeybee may help ensure the survival of its own genetic material shared by other bees in its hive by sacrificing its life to sting an intruder, so a human mother may help ensure the survival of her own genetic material by sacrificing herself to save her children from death or danger (or, more precisely, the mother’s genes compel the organism of the mother to sacrifice itself to save the organisms of her children, in order to ensure the survival of the
same genes, one-half of which are also carried by the children’s organisms). Thus is the reproductive fitness of selfish genes increased by altruism—when fitness is inclusive of all carriers of one’s shared genes. As leading sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson has put it, “The individual pays, his genes and tribe gain, altruism spreads.” But if this were so, then people would only be altruistic to those who share their genes, and only in rough proportion to the extent that they do share their genes—children would elicit more altruism than, say, nieces and nephews. But that is very often not the case. People frequently do sacrifice themselves in various ways for people who do not share their genes, even sometimes for foreigners and strangers. Indeed, some moral systems that billions of people embrace command people to love their neighbors as themselves, to love their enemies, to repay evil with good, and to perform many actions that normally reduce reproductive fitness. “Inclusive fitness” therefore does not in the end explain the oddity of selfish genes acting altruistically. Morality is often not functional for survival, yet people act morally anyway.

The sociobiological and evolutionary psychology explanation of morality also has difficulty making a plausible jump from the (anthropomorphized) gene as self-interested actor to the conscious and self-conscious person acting with moral intentions. Somewhere in the process, the alleged genes have to trick or manipulate the thinking person into purposive beliefs and acts that may not be good for the person but are good for the genes. Sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists have introduced revisionist notions such as “empathetic emotions,” “reciprocal altruism,” and “religious kinship imagery” to help make this leap. But these moves inevitably shift explanatory weight from hard-wired genetic self-interest to human agents as perceiving, feeling, discerning, evaluating, choosing actors—in short, toward human freedom and responsibility.

The choice in the end is between a model of humans as genetic dopes who are consistently hoodwinked by their genetics to sacrifice themselves naively for the sake of their selfish genes; or a model of humans as possessing some strong genetic propensities toward altruism that are significantly mediated by supragenetic capacities for understanding, awareness, commitment, and choice. Choosing the first model eliminates any shred of our belief in human freedom, dignity, choice, rights, and responsibility—which is to say, morality itself as we know it. But choosing the second model—something like which I hope is the more obviously preferable option between the two—automatically opens up new theoretical explanatory possibilities that no longer particularly need sociobiological assumptions as starting points. In short, sociobiological and evolutionary psychology accounts of human morality either entail a radical reductionism that is intellectually problematic and, for most of us, morally objectionable; or they require supplemental theoretical elaborations that tend to undermine the need for sociobiological assumptions and logic in the first place.

Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology’s particular moral problems may be worth developing a bit, just to be clear about them. When human morality is redefined entirely in relation to reproductive fitness—so that morality is no longer driven by natural law or the will of God or self-evident inherent moral values—then we lose any real moral standard by which to judge actions. Genetic survival and extinction in a competitive environment is all that is. Beyond that we can have nothing evaluative to say about which genes successfully reproduce or how they do it. Indeed, we no longer even possess standards for value judgments about what constitutes progress in evolution. It is finally of no more value that humans survive than do bacteria. Why, on sociobiological grounds, should one be any “better” than another? Furthermore, if some humans have genetic propensities that enable them to survive and thrive while, or even because, other humans die out, it is difficult, given the sociobiological account, to explain why that should not happen; or why, if it did, anyone should necessarily feel any moral concern or sense of tragedy about it. Some die. Some live. Natural processes work their way out. That is all. If any sociobiology or evolutionary psychology worth considering theoretically gives us any reliable normative direction, it is that the fittest genes should survive and the organisms that carry them should do what they need to do to ensure that outcome. Even then, any notion of “should” makes little sense, really, since what will happen will simply happen by natural process. For sociobiology and evolutionary
psychology to end up with any serious substantive morality requires smuggling in auxiliary assumptions and commitments that are alien to its own intellectual system.

Thus, while ideas like “inclusive fitness” may explain certain actions between specific individuals in particular circumstances, they hardly account for the kind of ever-present orientation to moral order that saturates and governs all of human social action and interaction that this chapter describes. Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology inevitably explain morality in functional terms, but morality is not always, perhaps even often, functional in ways that matter to sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. Their accounts of human morality are thus not particularly plausible. They often read like nervous attempts by apostles of the Darwinian evolutionary paradigm to salvage the paradigm from the very uncomfortable, ubiquitous anomalies of human moral order and action as we humans experience and observe them. Edward O. Wilson’s recent popular restatement of the sociobiological account of morality, for instance, is so governed by a naïve and un-self-reflexive faith in scientific objectivity and authority and so replete with false dichotomies, gross generalizations, simplistic reductionisms, and ill-informed conflations of religious differences that it is a marvel that critical thinkers take these kinds of sociobiological explanations of morality seriously, even though they do emanate from the Ivy League.29 Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology’s case might be merely amusing, were it not for the monumentally misanthropic practical consequences that should follow any widespread embrace of its program. One can only hope that most moral, believing animals have more sense than to let that happen.30

Rejecting the reductionism of explaining human morality as serving the interests of selfish genes, however, does not require the dismissal of an interest in biological factors in human social life. Nor does it necessitate the rejection of possible evolutionary frameworks of explanation. In whatever other ways that human animals may be mental or moral or spiritual beings, we are also clearly biological organisms, and there is no reason to think that biology and mental, moral, and spiritual life do not interact. Of course they do. A much more plausible account of human morality than that offered by traditional sociobiology and more recent evolutionary psychology requires an appreciation for the multileveled character of life and the world, and for the reality of emergent properties. Such an approach is self-consciously antireductionistic and attracted to the ideas of emergence and supervenience. This is not the place to elaborate these concepts.31 Suffice it to say here that more plausible accounts of the sources of human morality suggest that human biology gives rise to the conditions necessary for the existence and operation of morality in human life—even if morality itself does not directly serve some biological survival function. Whether as the result of long evolutionary development or having been created this way by a divine Creator, or both, human animals have the biological infrastructure that makes them capable of the kind of intellectual and emotional work necessary to live and act as moral animals.

The biologist Francisco Ayala suggests three necessary and jointly sufficient, biologically grounded, cognitive conditions for the emergence of human morality: first, the ability to anticipate the consequences of one’s actions; second, the ability to make value judgments (“to perceive certain objects or deeds as more desirable than others”); and third, the ability to choose between alternative courses of action. According to Ayala,

ethical behavior is an attribute of the biological makeup of humans and is, in that sense, a product of biological evolution. But I see no evidence that ethical behavior developed because it was adaptive in itself. I find it hard to see how evaluating certain actions as either good or evil (not just choosing some action rather than others, or evaluating them with respect to their practical consequences) would promote the reproductive fitness of the evaluators. Nor do I see how there might be some form of “incipient” ethical behavior that would then be further promoted by natural selection. The three necessary conditions for there being ethical behavior are manifestations of advanced intellectual abilities. It seems that the likely target of natural selection was the development of these advanced intellectual capacities. We make moral judgments as a consequence of our eminent intellectual abilities, not as an innate way for achieving biological gain.32

This argument makes sense and is helpful as far as it goes. Even so, Ayala’s case only explains the biologically grounded conditions necessary for the emergence of morality. It does not explain why those
conditions did in fact give rise to morality. Animals with the intellectual capacity to anticipate consequences of action, to make value judgments, and to choose among alternatives could very well put those capacities only to instrumentally functional purposes. Intellectually endowed protohumans, for instance, might see that sharper spear heads make hunting easier, may judge that easier hunting is more desirable than more difficult hunting, and so may choose to invest time and effort into fashioning pointed spear heads. But why should such animals go beyond putting their eminent intellectual capacities to instrumentally functional purposes, adding to that the engagement in distinctively moral purposes? Why start making the very different sort of claims that some things are not only desirable but good, right, just, worthy, and noble in and of themselves, independent of their instrumental function?

The slippage in Ayala’s argument is found in his second condition, the “ability to make value judgments.” For there is a crucial difference between desirable and morally right. Ayala does note that moral judgments are a particular subclass of value judgment, those that “are not dictated by one’s own interest or profit but by regard for others,... [that concern the values of right and wrong in human conduct.” But in his discussion, Ayala only speaks about the conditions that make morality possible, not those that have made it actual. Just because I have the capacity to become a skydiver does not mean that I have or ever will. I won’t. Why then are human animals such profoundly morally oriented and guided beings? Why do they, for instance, recurrently seek truth for its own sake, and carry out moral obligations even sometimes at great cost to themselves? Ayala’s argument does not really explain the motivation or mechanism. He does provide a smart and helpful critique of traditional sociobiological accounts of human morality, and he takes helpful steps in thinking well about the relationship between biology and morality. But he stops short of offering a complete argument about human morality’s sources.

The British philosopher Anthony O’Hear has recently advanced what may be a helpful contribution to this question in his book Beyond Evolution: Human Nature and the Limits of Evolutionary Explanation. O’Hear focuses on the particular human cognitive trait of being not only conscious but also self-conscious creatures. In self-consciousness, O’Hear finds the source of reflective questioning about the reasons for assertions and beliefs, the testing of claims and convictions in light of what is really true and good, the understanding of life in moral terms. The argument runs as follows. Merely conscious animals experience pleasures, pains, and needs and react to the world in terms of them. Conscious animals may have dispositions and even beliefs, may accumulate knowledge about their environment, may engage in various practices, and can actively respond to life in the world. But humans are not merely conscious animals, they are also self-conscious animals. And self-conscious animals not only have experiences, pleasures, pains, and beliefs but are aware that they have them. The self-conscious animal knows that it is a knower. It is thus able as a self to “step back from” its experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and reactions and consider them from different points of view. Self-consciousness thus introduces a new dimension of awareness that creates various forms of “distance” between the self and the thoughts and experiences and desires of the self, which the merely conscious creature cannot. And it is this distance that introduces the “strong evaluations” entailed in morality. For the self-conscious self, now able to distance itself from its own thoughts, beliefs, desires, and reactions, naturally and inevitably comes to consider the possibility that its thoughts and beliefs and desires and reactions are neither necessarily shared by others nor the only ones it might hold or choose or feel. Thus the thoughts, beliefs, desires, and reactions of self-conscious selves are not simply experienced in stream-of-consciousness but become distinct objects capable of more or less detached examination and evaluation. This gives rise to the search for standards more objective or reliable than the self’s own thoughts, feelings, desires, and reactions by which to evaluate their merits. In this way, I realize that my beliefs and dispositions are, as O’Hear puts it,
standard against which its mental map is to be judged. And so we get an aspect of reason and reasoning quite different
from [Human] ... conceptions of reason as the instrument and slave of life. Its nature is also to be the critic of life and
the passions.34

This then is the primal spring of morality, as O’Hear explains: “At any moment the demands of life’s
flow can be held up by us to scrutiny, we can step outside the steady stream of judgments and practical
decisions we are continually making so as to see if they satisfy some standard not limited by the limits
of our life or cognitive powers. We can, as it were, step outside our cognitive and practical frameworks
and question the validity of the frameworks themselves.”

The reason, by this account, that humans are peculiar among animals in being moral animals is that
humans are uniquely self-conscious animals. Self-consciousness gives rise to reflective distances
between the self and its cognitions, emotions, and desires. And those distances provoke the quest for
standards above and beyond the self’s cognitions, emotions, and desires by which they might be
evaluated as worthy of thinking, feeling, and believing or not. O’Hear writes: “The very fact of being
self-conscious about our beliefs, of being in the full sense believers...initiates a process in which we
search for what is true because it is true, rather than because it serves some interest of ours.” One
assumption undergirding O’Hear’s argument that is not very obviously said is that humans normally
seek to bring their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires into line with those that they should
objectively think, feel, believe, and want; for, as he puts it, “we cannot at the one time believe something
and doubt its truth.”35 It is thus the identification and formulation of those more objective standards that
create the basis for and content of the moral orders that humans produce, inhabit, discharge, and defend.

Whatever else are the strengths and weaknesses of O’Hear’s argument, he has at least provided an
account of the sources of human morality that does not appear to suffer from the functionalism of
sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and other social utility theories. Humans are moral animals not
primarily because morality serves some instrumental interest (even if in cases it may). Humans are
moral animals, rather, because they experience, in part as a result of their self-consciousness, a particular
relationship to themselves and the world that evokes a search for standards beyond themselves by which
they may evaluate themselves. This is an account of morality that also takes human cognizance and
intention seriously, as the sociobiological account does not. On these two counts, it is commendable.
Whether or not we can press the discussion further to a more satisfying explanation, including one
concerning the sources of self-consciousness, remains to be seen.

In any case, what is clear for my purposes is that, whether we are able to explain morality’s sources
well or not, human animals are in fact profoundly and nearly inescapably moral and believing animals.
And until we accept and account for that fact, our theories of culture and action will be badly deficient.
It will be the task of the following chapters to elaborate and support that claim.

Endnotes

1. Here I very closely follow Charles Taylor, who describes morality as involving “discriminations of right and wrong,
better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand
independently of these and offer standards by which they can be judged.” Taylor, Sources of the Self (Cambridge:
Harvard University Press, 1989), 4. In these pages, I use the term “normative” somewhat more broadly than the term
“moral,” insofar as the normative includes systems directing behavior—such as customs, mores, protocols, etiquettes, and
so on—that do not always convey the stronger sense of the moral as defined here. The culturally moral is thus a
conceptual subset of the culturally normative.

2. Charles Taylor, Human Agency and Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Taylor here is following
20. One might question whether what Taylor calls second order desires are actually desires, or whether they might more
accurately be called judgments or evaluations.


4. Motivation is often defined as the process of activating, directing, and maintaining behavior or action, which psychologists
typically differentiate into internal and external motivations, both aspects of which the following argument incorporates.

5. Here I pick up on that aspect of Robert Wuthnow’s cultural sociology that highlights the centrality of moral order in
human social life. Thus, in Meaning and Moral Order (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 346, Wuthnow
observed, “Social relations require some degree of organization and ... this organization is not supplied in all cases either by totally coercive power structures or by totally self-interested exchanges of goods and services. Even in coercive and self-interested exchanges of goods and services, signals need to be sent about actors’ positions and the course of action they are likely to take. The signals constitute, on the one hand, the moral order and are, on the other hand, supplied by the cultural forms such as ideology and rituals.” At this point, Durkheimians may suggest that humans are moral simply because they are social, and the social is the essential source of the moral. This book’s argument is friendly to an intimate connection between the social and the moral—see, for example, the discussion below under “Some Implications”—but seeks to ground the moral more specifically in something closer to the operation of “human nature,” and not simply as a product of collective social relations, than may be comfortable for some Durkheimian theorists.

6. Some animals that do not appear to possess the moral faculties discussed in this chapter seem to display behaviors that we think of as altruistic, and this altruism appears to have a genetic basis. See below, however, the discussion on sociobiology as an inadequate explanation of human moral commitments and actions.


15. Here is an indication of the power of moral order and moral commitment: one sympathetic colleague who reviewed this book’s manuscript worried that even my use of these examples of morally deviant ideas—particularly the one about genetic differences—would invite personal attributions and criticisms from readers assuming that I am somehow sympathetic to these views, which I am not, and suggested that I simply drop some of them. Thus even hypothetical illustrations for theoretical arguments may become morally loaded and potentially dangerous.


29. See Wilson, “Biological Basis of Morality.”


31. But some helpful starting points include Donald Polkinghorne, Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Nancey Murphy and George Ellis, On the Moral Nature of the Universe (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); Nancey Murphy, Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1997), particularly the chapter titled “Supervenience and the Nonreducibility of Ethics to Biology.”


34. O’Hear, Beyond Evolution, 24. The following quotes come from pp. 24—25.

35. O’Hear, Beyond Evolution, 30. This cognitive antidissociation assumption is not an unreasonable one, although it is one that some may contest.
Chapter 3
Believing Animals

For centuries, many Western thinkers have tried to identify a universal and certain foundation for human knowledge. Various movements within the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “Enlightenment” in particular sought to specify an authoritative foundation of knowledge not based on the revelation, faith, and tradition of Christianity.[1] Instead this project sought to identify a strong foundation for knowledge that would be secular (nontheistic), universal (applicable to all people despite their differences), and indubitable (irrefutable and certain). One way to understand philosophical epistemology since René Descartes is as a story of repeated unsuccessful attempts to identify this kind of foundation of human knowledge. Like the would-be champions who sought to become the one able to draw the fabled sword from the stone and so become king, many philosophers have ventured to identify this prized strong foundation of knowledge on which the rational, universal, modern social order could be built. In each case, however, other philosophers always stepped forward to demonstrate why their attempts at this secular, universal, indubitable epistemology did not work.

As a consequence, what we have come rather decisively to see in recent decades is that this epistemological project itself is fatally flawed and that all such attempts to discover a universal, indubitable foundation of knowledge have failed and necessarily will fail. Strong foundationalism is dead. Its quest has come up empty-handed. The sword remains fast in the stone without a champion to remove it. There is no secular, universal, indubitable foundation of knowledge available to us humans.[2]

Homo Credens

What we have come to see is that, at bottom, we are all really believers. The lives that we live and the knowledge we possess are based crucially on sets of basic assumptions and beliefs, about which three characteristics deserve note. First, our elemental assumptions and beliefs themselves cannot be empirically verified or established with certainty. They are starting points, trusted premises, postulated axioms, presuppositions—“below” which there is no deeper or more final justification, proof, or verification establishing them. In philosophical terms, these beliefs and commitments may be “justified,” but they are not “justifiable.”[3] Rather, they themselves provide the suppositional grounds on which any sense of justification, proof, or verification for a given knowledge system are built.[4]

At a very basic level, for instance, it is safe to guess that probably most readers of this essay believe in causation (that forces and agents can cause effects in or on others), in natural regularity (that the natural world as we observe it works the same way in places where we do not observe it), and in the temporal continuity of experience (that life when we wake up tomorrow will function very similarly to the way it functions today). These we believe in so “deeply” that we do not even think about them. We simply assume them and build up the living of our lives on them. None of those beliefs, however, can be verified as definitely true in fact. There is simply nothing that could do so. All we can do is assume them in faith, and then presumably find them to be sufficiently trustworthy and functional assumptions to live by.[5] In principle there is nothing that must stop a person from being an unbeliever with regard to these assumptions. I could live my life in full expectation that some unknown impending morning when I wake up everything will be radically different. And in fact a day could very well come when my personal unbelief in the temporal continuity of experience is fully validated—none of us can know that this could never happen. (Indeed, the many Christians who believe in the second coming of Christ as consummating the “last days” with Jesus descending on the clouds do sincerely believe in something quite like this.) Thus we all proceed with whatever assumed basic beliefs we trust in and build our lives on, even though we cannot finally know them to be right.

To conclude this first point: Some people do or have believed that humans are born to be free, while others have believed that some humans are born to be slaves. Some believe that men and women are equal, while others that women are essentially the lesser of the two. Some people believe that a Great Spirit created the world long ago, while others believe the universe is the result of a naturalistic Big Bang long ago. Some believe that a natural law infuses life and the world, while others believe that morality and regularity are social constructions of relative human invention. Who is right and who is wrong? Disagreement does not mean that all are wrong or that all is relative. Some of these beliefs might be right. Indeed, we ourselves
believe some of them are right. But our convictions and disagreements about these are based precisely on larger systems of beliefs grounded in deeper suppositional beliefs, and we cannot get around the fact that these starting-point assumptions and beliefs cannot be empirically verified or established with certainty. We simply cannot set aside our basic belief commitments and find independent evidence definitively to demonstrate that one or another of these beliefs is true. At bottom, we simply believe them or we don’t, for what we take to be arguably more or less good reasons.

A second important characteristic of our presuppositional assumptions, implicit in the previous discussion but that I should make explicit, is that most of these starting-point assumptions and beliefs are not universal. By “universal” here, I mean simply the descriptive point of a belief or assumption being found everywhere among humans, and I note empirically that human assumptions and beliefs in fact are not. They are thus neither intellectually self-evident to nor actually shared by the rest of the human race. It is true that, for any one person to assume and believe some assumptions and beliefs means that some larger cultural community of which they are a part, some historical tradition, some “web of interlocutors” shares these assumptions and beliefs together. For sustaining such sets of assumptions and beliefs requires a community, a “plausibility structure” to suppose, affirm, and communicate them. Lone individuals who maintain idiosyncratic assumptions and beliefs about elemental reality that are not shared by others are people we normally take to be mentally ill.

Nevertheless, a community of belief does not universality make. All around the world and across history, different believing communities have supposed as starting points very different, often incompatible sets of assumptions and beliefs. One good introductory course in anthropology and one in world history should be enough to make that perfectly clear. Some societies believe identities and worth must be achieved, while others mark them as ascribed from birth. Some peoples embrace cultures that deeply prize the violence of warfare and conquest, while others live within cultural worlds of peace and cooperation. Some communities ground institutional legitimacy in rational legal authority, while others in charisma or tradition. Some cultures venerate their elderly as wise and honorable, while others cherish youth and view their elderly as insignificant annoyances. Some peoples believe that land, beaches, and water can and should be privately owned, while others have been no more able to conceive of the private ownership of land than the private ownership of air, the sky, and the stars. Some cultures believe that intimate and enduring marriage partner relationships should be formed entirely on considerations of economic and political interests determined by family elders, while others believe that the selection of a marriage mate is rightly each individual’s personal choice to be determined by his or her own subjective experience of romantic love. Such examples can be vastly multiplied. But the basic point concerns the nonuniversality of presuppositional beliefs and assumptions that constitute believing communities’ elemental “cultural ontologies.”

We would be mistaken here to suppose—following the often misleading “traditional” versus “modern” society dichotomy that appeals, for different reasons, to both romantics and liberals—that primordial, world-defining beliefs shape the mythical worlds of primitives but not of enlightened moderns. We moderns are in our own peculiar ways no less deeply trusting in unverifiable objects of belief and faith than any pre-moderns have ever been. The Aztecs willingly engaged in the human sacrifice of many thousands of their own people every year on the altar of the sun god Tenochtitlan, believing that the victims’ blood contained an energy needed to nourish the gods and the universe. Contemporary Americans willingly sacrifice about five thousand of our teenagers every year in large steel boxes propelled rapidly through space, because, finally, we believe in the reality and moral worth of individual freedom, mobility, and self-direction. Certain ancient Hebrews believed that God spoke to them in dreams and through angels—indeed, they experienced it and recorded it in writing. Certain contemporary Americans believe that their “inner child” (or unresolved parental relationships or repressed instincts, etc.) speak to them through dreams and intuitions—they too experience it and record it in writing. Modesty—despite having often, because of its particular moral belief system, characterized “mere beliefs” as subjective and emotion based and thus needing to be overridden by reason and knowledge—has in fact done little to change our human condition as fundamentally believing animals.

That moderns are every bit the believers our pre-modern ancestors were is also evident in the diversity of unverifiable assumptions and beliefs that govern so many of our modern life concerns. Many contemporary
Americans, for example, believe that the object inside the uterus of a woman between the time a man’s sperm penetrates her egg and the time she gives birth (note the difficulty of even discussing this matter in terms that are not themselves deeply belief committed) is a living human person, an unborn child, intimately linking the bodies and lives of generations and deserving without exception of all the love and protection that the most vulnerable members of our families and communities merit. Other contemporary Americans believe that this very same thing is a mass of tissue somewhat alien to the woman’s own body that potentially deeply threatens her autonomy and well-being, which gives her every legitimate right to dispose of it. No amount of empirical evidence has been able to adjudicate between these views, and none likely will.\[11\] For in the end these views are essentially faith commitments to deep beliefs that turn out to be “true” only within larger frameworks of belief and practice built up themselves on deeper sets of unverifiable assumptions and beliefs. The only evidence that can “verify” either view proves to have already been constituted and framed by the deeper belief commitments from which the view itself is derived—which largely helps to explain the interminability of America’s abortion debate. And the more “pragmatic” view that most Americans in the compromising middle end up adopting—that abortion really does end a human life and so is morally objectionable but that nobody except the mother has the right to make that final decision—itself could only possibly make sense in the context of certain baseline assumptions, beliefs, and practices that themselves cannot finally be verified or legitimated except by first committing to them. In this and very many other ways, we moderns stake our lives, our convictions, our politics, our associations on governing beliefs that no available independent or objective reason can conclusively verify. In the end, we simply believe them—as assumptions and commitments embedded in larger systems of belief and practice that make each of the particular beliefs seem perfectly valid.

The third characteristic about all of our suppositional assumptions and beliefs worth noting is that no “deeper,” more objective or independent body of facts or knowledge exists to adjudicate between alternative basic assumptions and beliefs. For those of this sort are presuppositional starting points in which we (mostly unconsciously) place our trust and are not derived from other justifying grounds. To some degree, different assumptions and beliefs may be thought of as bearing up better or worse under the weight of the known or experienced facts. But the problem is that both what are taken to be “the facts” and our experiences are themselves significantly determined and made salient by the elemental assumptions and beliefs that function presuppositionally to constitute them. The ability of data to prove or disprove a theory, in other words, is problematic when the data themselves are always and profoundly theory-laden. It is our assumptions and beliefs that tell us what is relevant data and not, under what conditions, and why. For this reason, the empirically evident fact that the sun rises in the East in the morning and crosses the sky to set in the West itself could not decide whether the astronomical theory of Ptolemy or of Copernicus was correct—each theory was able, given its own presuppositions, to construe the evidence as consistent with its larger claims.\[12\] Thus normally the best anyone can do, at least in the short and medium run, is to own up to one’s starting-point suppositions, to recognize them as such, and to work out with integrity their implications. Whether or not this must lead us to a relativist, skeptical, or nihilist position that despairs of ever adjudicating between alternative beliefs and worldviews is a question I take up at the end of the next chapter.

We see, then, that what any people, including ourselves, know about life and the world, about how life ought to be lived, is not founded on an indubitable, universal foundation of knowledge. These are not built on solid piles that have been driven down into the very bedrock of known reality that lies accessible beneath every human person. Rather all of our knowledge and life practices—however obvious and well-founded they may seem to us—are built like large rafts on beams of particular trusted assumptions and beliefs that themselves float freely in the shifting seas of culture and history. And all of us, in our particular, historical communities of believers float together on those rafts, typically unable to see beyond our rafts to the open sea on which we float and thus accustomed to assuming our raft to be all that exists and is true.

Well-educated moderns are, of course, socialized to see other rafts. We are educated to recognize, tolerate, and appreciate a diversity of perspectives, paradigms, and cultures. At least to a point. For this modern, multivisioned self is itself, of course, a historically situated position constituted by faith commitments to particular basic assumptions and beliefs—about individuality, autonomy, cosmopolitanism, equality, relativity, self-expression, truth, and so on. And when occasions arise that threaten these trusted assumptions
and beliefs, sophisticated, flexible, tolerant, liberal, well-educated moderns quickly show themselves to be the particularistically true believers they are—people committed, for the sake of establishing their very reality, to certain starting-point suppositions as nonnegotiable.

Try, for example, persuading your cocktail party guests with all sincerity and persistence that human freedom is evil, that human rights do not exist, that some groups of people are inherently inferior to others, that one view of truth is absolutely correct and all others are false, that people need to learn to suppress and deny their own inner feelings and ideas, or that we would do better not to learn about the world beyond our own local people and boarders. Most likely, you will find it impossible to convince your guests that you are serious, since such ideas are so far removed from the realm of serious conceivable possibilities. But if you somehow are able to persuade them that you are serious, you will find that your arguments deeply violate your guests’ very sacred belief commitments. How well they will be able to control their shock, indignation, and wrath will depend mostly on how many drinks they have consumed. Yet, in fact, neither they nor we can definitively and independently verify that these beliefs are actually right or wrong. They are rather right and wrong within particular knowledge systems that are built on trusted assumptions and presupposed beliefs that then make them “obviously” right or wrong.

Thus, for example, getting a committed neo-Nazi to adopt the position that Jews are not inherently inferior to “Aryan races” will not be accomplished by arguing empirical evidence. For all such evidence is itself constituted, framed, and made significant by the basic belief commitments that define the very matter under dispute. Actual Jews will rather obviously seem inferior to this Nazi. Rather, the Nazi must somehow more deeply come to see that his presuppositional beliefs are defective and then replace those with an alternative set of assumptions and beliefs—which will then make his previous empirical evidence about Jewish inferiority that was once so compelling to him now seem stupid and shameful. This process of change involves something much closer to undergoing a religious conversion than having one’s mind altered in a rational argument about “the facts.”

I am suggesting, then, that all human persons, no matter how well educated, how scientific, how knowledgeable, are, at bottom, believers. We are all necessarily trusting, believing animals, creatures who must and do place our faith in beliefs that cannot themselves be verified except by means established by the presumed beliefs themselves. The Muslim knows that Allah exists and commands because the Koran (a scripture revealed by Allah) tells her so. The agnostic knows that he cannot know whether God exists because his ideas about what we can possibly know (which are derived from nontheistic assumptions) tell him so. The empiricist knows that her research experiments and examinations provide truthful and reliable information about reality because she believes (based on empirically unverifiable empiricist assumptions) that sensory observations of the perceptible world provide reliable and accurate accounts of reality. The Buddhist (through Buddhist teachings) knows that our apprehension of ourselves as separate individuals is a delusion that must be annihilated in order to grasp the supreme Oneness of all of life and reach the bliss of nirvana.

To say that we are all finally believing animals is, in part, to say that we simply cannot function at all in our human lives without first committing ourselves to sets of assumptions and presupposed beliefs that make any functioning human life possible. We cannot do this any more than we can write a letter without an alphabet, vocabulary, and shared rules of grammar. If we perchance could imagine a human animal that is without any starting-point assumption or belief of the kind I have discussed—and what I have already said suggests that we cannot possibly imagine this, any more than we can imagine, say, dry water—then the animal we would have would be one that is incapacitated, paralyzed, without agency, lacking orientation, bereft of any bearings by which to proceed in life. Such a radically “unbelieving” human animal would have no place to begin, no categories, no reason to act, no identity. Only by believing in, committing to, placing faith in certain suppositions and propositions can we human animals ever be able to perceive, think, know, feel, will, choose, and act. Augustine of Hippo was more than a little right, then, in observing in the fourth century A.D.: “I believe that I may understand.”

To be clear, it is not that groups of humans cannot share a common reason. Nor that we cannot understand that a comprehensible reality beyond our consciousness really exists. Nor that we cannot come to discover extensively how aspects of that world works. It is simply that all of this knowledge and understanding, such
as it is, does not rest on an epistemological foundation that is indubitable and universal and that can provide certain knowledge binding on everyone. All of our knowledge, rather, is situated within particularistic knowledge systems that are ultimately based on beliefs and assumptions that are nonuniversal and incapable of being independently and objectively verified.

**From Philosophy to Sociology**

Understanding ourselves as believing animals has implications for sociological work. First, it helps account for the tremendous diversity of human cultures and practices. Since knowledge is not founded on one universal and indubitable foundation but is rather built up from sets of starting-point assumptions and beliefs that are often very different from each other, humans are in a situation of tremendous world-defining openness that leads to a diversity of outcomes. Thus we find human belief communities for whom the natural world is sacred, possessed by spirits, and deserving the utmost reverence and other communities for whom nature is simply a lot of material resources waiting to be conquered and exploited for financial profit. We find communities for whom it is ultimately real that all people are and should be equal yet others for whom humanity is distributed in a hierarchy of differential importance and worth. Some believing communities see history as an endless cycle of recurring process finally going nowhere, while others are based on a belief in the real historical progress of civilization, morality, and humanity.

Recognizing that we humans are at bottom believing animals also helps to explain our persistent practice of sacralizing physical and mental objects. Humans are never simply believers in purely practical, functional terms. We are recurrently, almost impulsively believers in systems of knowledge and practice that involve sacreds and profanes. In and among the ordinary features of our lives, we set apart certain aspects as of such importance, power, or worth that they deserve our honor, our devotion, our protection. These we treat as sacrosanct, as inviolable, as holy—though not necessarily in strictly religious terms. In some communities, the sacred may be the spirits of ancestors or the cross of Christ. In other communities, what is sacred is the honor of noble warriors or the autonomy of the individual, the rights of private property, and the equality of all people.

However precisely we conceive and experience it, the sacred in any case involves in us strong emotional responses. We are highly sensitive about what is sacred to us, fervent, impassioned, and defensive if necessary. We are prepared to sacrifice for the sacred, in some cases to die and perhaps to kill for it. Again, not every sacred is religious.[14] The sacred may center on fatherland, liberty, science, the party, the proletariat, the environment, equality, the nation, sexual fulfillment. But inevitably there appear in human communities objects of belief of such worth and significance that they evoke the devotion, veneration, sacrifice, and assiduous protection of and from their believers.

Here lies a key link to this essay’s observation that humans are fundamentally moral animals. We are moral animals, in part, because we are believing animals, and the character of our believing inevitably inclines toward sacralization, the differentiation of sacred from profane. Humans do not believe primarily in detached, abstract, practical modes. Our believings are what create the conditions and shape of our very perceptions, identity, agency, orientation, purpose—in short, our selves, our lives, and our worlds as we know them. They are therefore crucial to us, of fundamental importance. And these most basic belief commitments, the objects of our elemental faith and trust, frame for us our worldviews, cultures, ideologies, and religions—as variable as they may be, and as conscious or unconscious about them as we may be. From these basic life and world definitions and maps our moral orientations derive—our sense of good and bad, right and wrong, worthy and unworthy, just and unjust, noble and shameful. And as these moral discriminations are rooted in the kind of presuppositional, life-constituting beliefs and assumptions discussed earlier, we do not and cannot relate to them finally as simply the products or reflections of our own opinions, preferences, inclinations, or desires. They come to stand in relation to us, rather, as above and beyond, objectively independent standards positioned to render judgment on our opinions, preferences, and desires.

Thus when the patriotic and loyal soldier sacrifices his life in battle for his comrades or country, he is not simply the victim of unfortunate circumstances. More profoundly, he is enacting the calling and obligations of an integrated moral order of nation, honor, and comradeship. To have done otherwise (even if nobody else would have ever known that he chose survival over sacrifice) would not simply mean being troubled in future
years with occasional pangs of regret or guilt—hardly enough to motivate someone to die for others. It would, for this kind of soldier, more importantly mean evading one of life’s most sacred callings, miscarrying one’s duty in a crucial moment of definition and testing, dishonoring country in cowardice and selfishness, and failing to love and honor one’s comrades-in-arms. In short, it would be a profound moral failing. Likewise, the contemporary insurance salesman who decides in midlife to divorce his wife, move to the Rockies, take up hang-gliding and dog sledding, and party with young women is not simply choosing appropriate means to achieving his personal preferences. More fundamentally, he is enacting a set of deep, largely unconscious normative beliefs about individual autonomy, masculine self-expression, and human self-fulfillment—elemental assumptions ultimately about the nature of human personhood and the character of human flourishing. And given his full (even if largely unconscious) embrace of these beliefs, for this man to have instead stayed home, endured his unsatisfying wife, repressed his desires for outdoor adventures and sexual escapades, and continued simply to try to win his company’s quarterly sales awards would have not only been frustrating and disappointing but would have also been cowardly, a denial of his true self, a transgression of the way things ought to be. Which is to say, it would have been a violation of a moral order.

The final sociological implication of the recognition that we humans are believers at our core is that we will never really understand human social life if we do not pay close attention to the content and function of the beliefs that humans together hold and build their lives on. Certain accounts of the human animal that do not accord importance to their ultimate condition as believers, but instead posit some universal, primordial drive or motivation, claim that we can afford to disregard human beliefs and their cultural derivatives. These accounts, which typically descend from the naturalistic, often utilitarian tradition of Western social theory, have many expressions: behaviorism, neoclassical economics, rational choice theory, exchange theory, artificial intelligence theory, public choice theory, sociobiology, and so on. At their core is the belief that human consciousness and action can be properly understood with reference to one foundational, universal, inalienable drive or interest—the pursuit of pleasure, the maximizing of rewards and minimizing of costs, the quest for social dominance, genetic reproduction, et cetera. What all of these theories badly miss, however, is the variable, world-open, creative, trusting, and believing condition at the core of human animals that generates a variety of socially constructed realities in diverse human communities, which constitute, mediate, and govern human consciousness, action, and institutions. In short, what they badly miss is the necessity for any good sociology to be a deeply and thoroughly cultural sociology—despite all the messiness and indeterminacy that entails.

Implicit in the account of human animals offered here, in other words, is the recognition that the starting-point presuppositions, assumptions, beliefs, and commitments of human communities actually have enormous ramifications for the character of those communities’ practices, perceptions, and institutions. In simple terms, basic beliefs have consequences. It matters a great deal in understanding social structures of inequality over the long run, for example, whether human communities suppose fundamentally that people through reincarnation are rewarded and punished for how they live their lives over many lives; that a common humanity of rationality, morality, and dignity has been created “in the image of God”; or that because there is no God all things are in fact (a) morally permissible. It matters in the formation of political life whether believing communities presume that history is an endless, unalterable cycle of repetition and futility or that history is the progressive story of valiant activists winning the ever-growing expansion of freedom, equality, and brotherhood. For that matter, it matters enormously for political life simply whether human communities can conceive and believe the categorical entities “vassal,” “subject,” “folk,” “rabble,” “compatriot,” “citizens,” or “constituent.” For one can have a certain political (or economic or familial or religious) social structure only after the constituent cultural elements of that structure are first imagined and believed.\[15\]

Therefore, sociological research programs that are fundamentally naturalistic, utilitarian, antimentalist, or noncultural will inevitably fail to understand human persons, consciousness, actions, and institutions. They are projects very badly gauged to address their subject of study and so necessarily have ended and will end in frustration, if not dead-ended failure. Properly understood, they are actually themselves historically situated moral projects, built up from presuppositions and assumptions that cannot be independently verified, and championed by devotees who (more or less consciously) believe in the moral worth of the projects. This—
much more than objective verifiability, intellectual plausibility, or empirical predictive payoff—is what finally explains the appeal and persistence of these moral/scientific projects. They embody and reinforce key elements of the secular Enlightenment story—the autonomously choosing individual, a godless universe composed only of energy and matter, a comprehensive and universal science of Man, the economic “laws” of the free marketplace, and so on. At bottom it is widespread belief in a particular moral order and the project it implies that so forcefully propels these theoretical visions.

**Modern Parochialism**

If the idea that all human persons are at bottom believing animals is to us novel or incredible, it is most likely so not because this does not well describe human persons. Rather, it is most likely because the deep assumptions and beliefs of the particular, historical system of knowledge and practice that encompasses and patterns most aspects of our lives—modern liberal democratic capitalism—have become our only horizon. This is the raft beyond which we cannot see. Modern liberal democratic capitalism, and the cultural ontology that floats it, is now, through the process of globalization and marketing, colonizing most regions of the world and most aspects of our lives.

We are very familiar with the story of how a hegemonic medieval Catholic feudalism unified the worldview of the “Middle Ages,” making it nearly impossible for peasants and lords alike to imagine anything other. That world became for its inhabitants fixed, unified, total.

What may be less clear to us today is that liberal democratic capitalism is effecting a similar outcome. Its suppositional beliefs, its deeply trusted assumptions, its elemental cultural ontology have become nearly invisible to us precisely because it has become ubiquitous and dominant. We thus mistake its set of historically recent, culturally relative, and reasonably contestable assumptions about the nature and purpose of human persons and society for the way things actually are. Ironically, the implausible nature of the believing animals thesis to us is itself the most powerful substantiation of the very thesis itself. For most of us are such committed and trusting believers in the basic assumptions that constitute our liberal democratic capitalist world that we cannot even recognize our own believing as such. The world we bring into being through believing has for us become fixed, unified, total. We are thus not in the end very different in this condition than the medieval peasant from whom the Enlightenment promised to raise and deliver us. We are finally the very same kind of animal, lacking solid foundations, and so building up our lives as firmly as we can on trust and faith.

**Endnotes**


[5] A key motif in many popular fictional narratives is the “pulling the rug out from under” key characters’ fundamentally assumed worlds, with the effect of radically undermining their (and perhaps the reader’s or viewer’s) elementally assumed realities. This, for instance, has been the appeal of television shows like *The Twilight Zone* and *The X-Files*. It is the fundamental plot of numerous popular movies, as with the 1998 film *The Truman Show* and the 1999 box office hit *The Matrix*. J. K. Rowling achieved an analogous effect with a key character in the climax of her 2000 best-seller, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. C. S. Lewis’s *Out of the Silent Planet* likewise turns the universe inside-out by showing our earth actually to be “Malacandra,” not an island home of life and communication in an otherwise empty universe, but—from the living, dancing universe’s point of view—an isolated center of silence and dark mystery.

[6] In another sense, not meant here, “universal” can mean a belief or assumption itself claiming that it is applicable or true everywhere and always. Thus people can hold beliefs, such as that humans possess inalienable rights or that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, that they understand as being applicable everywhere, even though they are not empirically found everywhere among humans.

[7] For my purposes, I am content to make this point as worded, recognizing the possibility, as some philosophers argue, that certain few basic beliefs—such as that there exist external objects—are and must be universally taken for granted, Thomas Reid’s notion of common sense and Ludwig Wittgenstein’s discussion of shared world pictures being cases in point. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 215—49; also see John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).
Although many attempts have been tried. Pro-life advocates, for example, advance evidence that fetuses not only look and behave remarkably like born human persons (for example, using fully formed fingers to suck thumbs), but also experience pain and struggle mightily against abortionists’ attempts to terminate their lives. For their part, pro-choice activists point out that an entity that simply cannot survive on its own, apart from another person’s biological support, can hardly be considered fully a person with a self possessing all of the rights pertaining to human personhood. Neither body of evidence, however, has managed to settle the debate, in part because the evidence itself is meaningless apart from other normative belief commitments and practices (concerning, for example, human autonomy and agency) that are required to make the evidence meaningful. And it is these conflicting normative beliefs that generate the differences over abortion in the first place.


For two different discussions also related to this approach, see Wolterstorff, Reason within the Bounds of Religion; Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

For one secular account of the sacred, see, for instance, Ronald Dworkin, Life’s Domain (New York: Vintage Books, 1994)

Chapter 4
Living Narratives

Many years ago, our human ancestors huddled around fires listening to shamans and elders telling imaginative stories by which they made sense of their world and their lives in it. They told myths about the world’s origins, and about how they as peoples came to be. They told legends about mighty heroes of old, about overcoming great adversity, about visions of the future. They narrated tales of moral struggle, about people good and bad, and about what happens to naughty children. They recounted myths about fairies, spirits, gods, and powerful cosmic forces. By narrating such fictional stories, our ancestors recounted meaningful explanations of a world that was to them mysterious and dangerous—and entertained themselves in the process. As primitives, telling such stories, myths, and legends was the only way they knew how to explain the world and contemplate how to live in it. And such was the condition of traditional human societies of all kinds up until a few hundred years ago.

But all of that has changed. We moderns no longer have to huddle around fires telling fanciful myths about creations, floods, trials, conquests, and hoped-for paradises. Science, industry, rationality, and technology have dispelled the darkness and ignorance that once held the human race captive to its fanciful fables. Today, through progress, enlightenment, and cultural evolution, we now possess positive knowledge, scientific facts, rational analyses. We no longer need to be a people of ballads and legends, for we are a people of periodic tables, technical manuals, genetic maps, and computer codes. We may tell fables to our children about wolves and witches and arks. But the adult world is one of modern, scientific information, facts, and knowledge. We have left behind myths and legends. We are now educated, rational, analytical. Indeed, by struggling to break out of the fear and ignorance of our ancestral myth-making past into the clear daylight of rational, scientific knowledge, we have opened up for the human race a future of greater prosperity, longevity, and happiness.

Such is the story we moderns—huddled around our televisions and computer work stations—like to tell each other. This is the dominant narrative by which we make sense of our world and the purpose of our lives in it.

The point here is not that modernity’s story is false. Narratives, myths, and fables can be true, in their way. The point, rather, is that for all of our science, rationality, and technology, we moderns are no less the makers, tellers, and believers of narrative construals of existence, history, and purpose than were our forebears at any other time in human history. But more than that, we not only continue to be animals who make stories but also animals who are made by our stories. We tell and retell narratives that themselves come fundamentally to constitute and direct our lives. We, every bit as much as the most primitive or traditional of our ancestors, are animals who most fundamentally understand what reality is, who we are, and how we ought to live by locating ourselves within the larger narratives and metanarratives that we hear and tell, and that constitute what is for us real and significant.[1]

What then exactly is narrative? Narrative is a form of communication that arranges human actions and events into organized wholes in a way that bestows meaning on the actions and events by specifying their interactive or cause-and-effect relations to the whole. Narratives are much more than chronicles, which merely list discrete events by placing them on timelines. Narratives seek to convey the significance and meaning of events by situating their interaction with or influence on other events and actions in a single, interrelated account. Narratives, thus, always have a point, are always about the explanation and meaning of events and actions in human life, however simple these may be.[2]

All narratives include a handful of essential elements. First, narratives have a set of characters or actors who are the subjects and objects of action. Second, narratives involve plots with typically structured sequences of beginning, middle, and end—although the plot may not necessarily present its story in sequential order. The plot’s beginning generally sets the story’s context and subject, the middle introduces a significant problem or conflict that the characters must address, and the end involves some outcome or resolution of the problem or conflict. Third, narratives convey significant points. They are
designed to draw the audience to an explanation, a revelation, and understanding, or an insight about life and the world. For this reason, with even the most elementary of narratives, audiences will press storytellers to complete unfinished narratives, to get to their stories’ point. So, if we meet in the hail and I tell you, “I drove downtown today to pick up Billy’s prescription, and was looking for a parking space” and then stop, you will probably reply, “Yeah? So?” You thus oblige me to complete my narrative—“Well, it took a long time because it was so crowded. But then the nicest man who was waiting in his car outside the store saw that I was having trouble and offered to let me have his space. I was so touched”—and so get to its point: even in a difficult world there are good people who can brighten one’s day and make life so much more enjoyable.

In order to construct a narrative, the storyteller selects specific events from the past that serve as the vehicles of commentary and meaning-making. Not all possible past happenings are important to recount, only those that render a particular story by emplotting selected elements in a way that conveys the larger intended moral and meaning. For in a narrative world not all “facts” matter. What matters is the more significant story running through, over, and under “the facts,” the story that itself constitutes what is a fact, what it is that matters.

But wait just a minute. What is this talk of narratives? The “postmodern” condition, we have been instructed of late, has brought with it the suspicion of, perhaps even the end of, coherent narratives, especially “grand narratives.” Postmodern people are the kind who simply cannot believe in the metanarratives offered by, say, Marxism, Christianity, and liberalism. The expansiveness, coherence, and claims to universality of these grand stories have become simply incredible to those who have lived through and beyond modernity.

However fashionable this notion has become in some intellectual circles, the suggestion of this chapter is that it simply is not true. The human animal is a moral, believing animal—inescapably so. And the larger cultural frameworks within which the morally oriented believings of the human animal make sense are most deeply narrative in form. Of course, postmodernism itself is a narrative, hardly providing an escape from story-based knowledge and meaning. But the problem in its claims about the end of metanarratives run still deeper than this self-contradiction. Postmodernism simply underestimates the vitality and appeal of certain narratives—particularly in America, of the modern story of progress and liberal freedom; and, for many, of the Christian story. Those metanarratives and their associated narratives are very much alive and well—however coherent or less than perfectly coherent they are. Progress and liberal freedom, in particular, are still the driving spirit, vision, and energy of contemporary public culture and social institutions. Postmodern claims on this point, therefore, cannot be taken seriously. We have no more dispensed with grand narratives than with the need for lungs to breathe with. We cannot live without stories, big stories finally, to tell us what is real and significant, to know who we are, where we are, what we are doing, and why.

**Narratives to Live By**

With this in mind, we can begin to see how narratives are composed and how they work, by examining first a very familiar and often very meaningful story to most United States citizens, what we might call the American Experiment narrative:

> Once upon a time, our ancestors lived in an Old World where they were persecuted for religious beliefs and oppressed by established aristocracies. Land was scarce, freedoms denied, and futures bleak. But then brave and visionary men like Columbus opened up a New World, and our freedom loving forefathers crossed the ocean to carve out of a wilderness a new civilization. Through bravery, ingenuity, determination, and goodwill, our forebears forged a way of life where men govern themselves, believers worship in freedom, and where anyone can grow rich and become president. This America is genuinely new, a clean break from the past, a historic experiment in freedom and democracy standing as a city on a hill shining a beacon of hope to guide a dark world into a future of prosperity and liberty. It deserves our honor, our devotion, and possibly the commitment of our very lives for its defense.

Such is the story many readers of this book have been told from earliest days by parents, teachers, textbooks, civic leaders, and politicians alike. It is a story that provides untold millions a most
significant collective identity, sense of place in the world, orientation to the good in life, basis of solidarity with strangers, ordering of time and emotions through national holidays and their ritual celebrations, and more. Without this narrative rendering of reality to tell and retell, very many Americans would confront the world with profound confusion and disorientation. For one thing, it would mean little to think of themselves as “Americans.” But with this national narrative constituting our individual and collective identities and practices, we together begin to know who we are, why we exist, how we should spend our lives, and what duty calls us to when we and our way of life are threatened or attacked.

By comparison, we might examine a very different narrative, perhaps equally powerful in the world today, that I will call the Militant Islamic Resurgence narrative—the story told by radical Muslims who are determined (by violence if necessary) to reorder the existing geopolitical world:

Once upon a time, even while Europe was stumbling through its medieval darkness, a glorious Muslim empire and civilization led the world in all manner of science, art, technology, and culture. Islam prospered for many centuries under faithful submission to Allah. But then, crusading Infidels from the Northwest invaded the land of Islam and over five hundred years have progressively conquered, divided, and subjugated us. Once glorious, Islam has now suffered endless humiliations, infidelities, and corruptions through Western colonialism, secularism, socialism, communism, mass consumerism, feminism, and eroticism. Now arrogant Western infidelity desecrates the sacred lands of Mohamed and Palestine with its armies, and by backing our Jewish enemies. But today the tide is finally turning. Islam has awoken and is now returning to fidelity and glory, with a new vision of devotion to faith. All believers must submit themselves to Allah and devote their lives to a holy war to drive out infidels both at home and abroad.

This story makes complete sense to tens of millions of Muslims throughout the world, although, with few exceptions, it is implausible for most Americans. Indeed, this narrative is a “counter narrative” that inverts the American Experiment story, generating history so that America is a source of evil and not good in the world.\[4\] Thus the U.S. responses to the attacks of September 11, 2001, were not simply about homeland security, concern for stability in the Middle East, and so on. Most profoundly, the U.S. response from the first day was a campaign to vindicate America’s national narrative.

Narratives, however, need not only heed the stories of nations and political movements. Larger, more encompassing metanarratives can plot all of reality and its meaning in stories. The Christian metanarrative is one familiar case; it runs something like this:

A personal, loving, holy God created the heavens and earth for his own glory, making humans in his very image, and establishing a relationship of care and friendship with humanity. Tragically, however, humans in pride have chosen to rebel against and reject God, the source of all life and happiness, thus plunging the world into all manner of evil, death, and spiritual blindness. But the love and grace of God is more powerful and determined than the sin of humanity, so through Israel God continued his covenant relationship to redeem the world from its sin. Rather than allowing creation to reap death and utter destruction as the full and just consequence of sin, God himself became human and freely took upon himself those evil consequences. Through the undeserved crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God conquered death, set aright the broken relationship, and opened a way for the redemption of creation. God now calls all people to respond through his Spirit to this divine love and grace by repenting from sin and walking in a new life of friendship with and obedience to God in the church and in the world. Those who persist in their denial of God’s love will finally get exactly what they want, the end of which is death. But those who embrace God will enjoy and worship him together as his people forever in a new heaven and earth.

This Christian metanarrative, like those of most religions, tells an all encompassing story about the origin and purpose of the cosmos, about the nature and destiny of humanity, about fundamental moral order. It offers a master narrative, a metanarrative that seeks to govern all other human cultures abound with narratives and metanarratives of varying scope and significance. The following are some very brief recounts of a few other major narratives familiar in Western culture:

*The Capitalist Prosperity narrative.* For most of human history, the world’s material production was mired in oppressive and inefficient economic systems such as primitive communalism, slavery, feudalism, mercantilism, and, more recently, socialism and communism. In eighteenth-century Europe and America, however, enterprising men hit upon the keys to real prosperity: private property rights, limited government, the profit motive, capital investment, the
free market, rational contracts, technological innovation— in short, economic freedom. The capitalist revolution has produced more wealth, social mobility, and well-being than any other system could possibly imagine or deliver. Nevertheless, capitalism is continually beset by utopian egalitarians, government regulators, and antientrepreneurial freeloaders who foolishly seek to fetter its dynamic power with heavy-handed state controls. All who care for a world of freedom and prosperity will remain vigilant in defense of property rights, limited government, and the free market.

The Progressive Socialism narrative. In the most primitive days, before the rise of private property, humans lived in communities of material sharing and equality. But for most of subsequent human history, with the rise of private property, the world’s material production has been mired in oppressive and exploitative economic systems, such as slavery, feudalism, mercantilism, and capitalism. The more history has progressed, the more ownership of the means of production have become centralized, and the more humanity has suffered deprivation and injustice. As the calamitous contradictions of capitalism began to intensify in the nineteenth century, however, a revolutionary vanguard emerged who envisioned a society of fraternity, justice, and equality. They proclaimed the abolition of private property, the socialization of production, and the distribution of goods not according to buying power but according to need. Right-wing tycoons and magnates who have everything to lose to the cause of justice fight against the socialist movement with all their power and wealth. But the power of workers in solidarity for justice will eventually achieve the utopia of prosperity and equality. Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!

The Expressive Romantic narrative. Once upon a time, people were free to experience the exhilarating power of nature, to assert their primitive selves, to shout raucously, to dance wildly, to fight hard, to love harder. They were noble, authentic, primal, unrestrained. The encroachments of civilization, however, have gradually domesticated humanity, smothering our authentic, primeval selves under blankets of repressive and artificial manners, refinements, restraints, proprieties, denials, and formal rationalities. Modern people hardly know any more who they are, what they feel, how to express their will and passions. Only a few free thinkers have broken through the suffocating restraint, and at great cost, but they point the way to authentic life and self-expression. They flaunt convention. They walk the less trod roads. They get in touch with their deepest selves. They beat drums. They splatter paint and scrawl poetry. They run naked through forests. They dance in the rain. They party wildly, altering states of consciousness. They are not bound by the bourgeois mores and manners that extinguish the human spirit. They fear not the Dionysian orgy, nor violent rebellion, nor bohemian isolation. They are troubled souls on wild and lonely quests, yet are society’s only hope for authentic and expressive living, perhaps even for redemption itself through pain and art.

The Scientific Enlightenment narrative. For most of human history, people have lived in the darkness of ignorance and tradition, driven by fear, believing in superstitions. Priests and lords preyed on such ignorance, and life was wearisome and short. Ever so gradually, however, and often at great cost, inventive men have endeavored better to understand the natural world around them. Centuries of such inquiry eventually led to a marvelous Scientific Revolution that radically transformed our methods of understanding nature. What we know now as a result is based on objective observation, empirical fact, and rational analysis. With each passing decade, science reveals increasingly more about the earth, our bodies, our minds. We have come to possess the power to transform nature and ourselves. We can fortify health, relieve suffering, and prolong life. Science is close to understanding the secret of life and maybe eternal life itself. Of course, forces of ignorance, fear, irrationality, and blind faith still threaten the progress of science. But they must be resisted at all costs. For unfettered science is our only hope for true enlightenment and happiness.

Much of the social discourse of the West for the last two hundred years and even today finds it roots in the struggles between these major rival narratives.

Note that there are many ways to recount these grand narratives. The foregoing versions are only one possible rendition of each. Still, most versions will follow similar basic story lines. Furthermore, any given individual who is in fact under the influence of a narrative may not fully recognize all elements of its story in his or her own life. A modern youth acting out the Expressive Romantic narrative, for example, may not actually be considering beating drums or splattering paint or running naked through forests. That does not matter. That does not reduce the power of the narrative in and over their life. It is not necessary for individuals to be fully aware of or articulate about the details or variants of the historical narratives that shape their lives or to represent in their particular experience every element of the narrative story line. Most people relate to their narratives not as literary critics or analytical philosophers but as believing actors swept up in the movement of grand historical drama. Their lives are embedded within and expressive of big stories, whether or not they can recognize every detail of any
version of the story in their present life.

Note too that these narratives I have told here in general terms. People often retell them with more concrete actors in action. The Scientific Enlightenment narrative, for example, is told with its actors not being simply “inventive men” but Ben Franklin, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Bill Gates. The Progressive Socialism narrative may be told in terms of Eugene Debs, Fidel, perhaps even Uncle Harry’s injury on the job that prompted a successful strike.

As an aside, what is striking about these major Western narrative traditions is how closely their plots parallel and sometimes mimic the Christian narrative. Hardly below their surfaces are the common threads of a secularized theology—a fall or awakening into sin, the redemptive quest, conversion and transformation, temptations to backslide, persevering in salvation, and an expectant hope for a final happiness and fulfillment. So deep did Christianity’s wagon wheels wear into the ground of Western culture and consciousness, that nearly every secular wagon that has followed—no matter how determined to travel a different road—has found it nearly impossible not to ride in the same tracks of the faith of old. Such is the power of moral order in deeply forming culture and story.

But I should not overemphasize the consistent patterns across narratives. For the West is only one civilization, and even within the West contrary stories have emerged. Outside of the West, many other narratives have shaped civilizations and cultures. So as not to belabor the point, I will recite only two. The first we may call the Divine Life and Afterlife narrative, different versions of which appear to have undergirded much of the politics, everyday life practices, and funeral rites in ancient Egypt.

Once upon a time, the universe was created by the sun-god, Ra, who appeared out of primeval chaos and created the air god Shu and his wife Tefnut; to these were born the sky-goddess Nut and the earth-god Geb, who in turn bore Osiris, Isis, and Set. Osiris became king and judge of the dead, and god of the waters of the Nile, the grain harvest, the moon, and the sun—the beloved protector of all, both poor and rich. One day, however, Osiris was murdered by his brother, Set. But he was restored to life by his wife, Isis, and so became the great god of the eternal persistence of life. Osiris was also avenged by his son, Horus, revealing the triumph of good over evil. All creation is thus spiritual in origin. We humans are born mortal, but we contain within ourselves the seed of the divine, which, if we avoid evil, can reach its full potential in us after death. Our purpose in this life is to nourish that seed, and, if successful, we will be rewarded with eternal life in the next world and be reunited with our divine origin. If we worship the gods, live honorable lives, avoid evil, and follow proper procedures in death, our souls—our “ka” and “ba”—will live eternally in the Underworld.

A second significant non-Western narrative, which we may name the Destined Unity with Brahman narrative, associated with Hinduism, has profoundly shaped the dominant culture and society of the Indus valley for millennia:

From the origin of eternal time, the one all-pervasive Supreme Being, the immense, unifying, immanent and transcendent force of Brahman, has created, preserved, and dissolved the universe in endless cycles. All of reality is moving toward an ultimate unity with the cosmic Absolute. However, bad karma, the moral and physical law of cause and effect, works to obstruct the path to salvation and the liberation. Each of us must therefore come to understand the truth and strive, through the way of works, knowledge, and devotion as spiritual paths to God-realization, to resolve, through cycles of reincarnation, our good and bad karmic results. Through rituals, self reflection, and devotion to one’s gods, one will work to reach one’s final destiny of unity with Brahman, find morality, and reach nirvana, the peaceful escape from the cycle of reincarnation.

Many readers of this book may find it hard to imagine living lives naturally and meaningfully formed by these two narratives, or many others we might retell, but that is because in those cases they are other people’s stories. Those other people whose lives are constituted by those other stories would no doubt have just as difficult a time imagining living meaningful lives out of the Christian or American Experiment or Expressive Romantic narratives that many of us are familiar with.

Different narratives and metanarratives, we might note, are more or less compatible with each other depending on their plots, actors, and other elements. Some narratives fit together only very uncomfortably, if at all— the American Experiment and Militant Islamic Resurgence being but one example. Others mesh together quite well. The American Experiment narrative, for instance, has always
easily been integrated into the larger Christian metanarrative. With only a few shifts in imagery, the Old World is Egypt; the Atlantic is the Jordan River; America is a promised land; Americans are God’s chosen people, a new Israel; George Washington is America’s Moses; political and economic (and, for some, moral) liberty is salvation; U.S. foreign policy fulfills our evangelical mission, and so on. To be sure, there are no definite formulas or schemas predicting how narratives will relate to each other. Human culture and history are simply too loaded with openness, creativity, contingency, and messiness to identify a single deep structure beneath and between our narratives. Some narratives derive from others. Other narratives oppose yet others. And some narratives both derive from and oppose others. Some narratives employ quite different dimensions of life, others partially overlap, while yet others seem to compete with each other as framings of reality. There are no positive laws in narrative to be discovered, only historical, interpretive analysis to conduct.

Another point about narratives that is important to see is that narratives are transposable and therefore can be applied creatively to varieties of historical situations, whether intentionally or not. The Exodus story about the liberation of the ancient Israelites from the oppressive hand of Egypt’s pharaoh, for example, has served as a narrative template for innumerable movements of liberation and revolution over centuries in the West. It was the transposability of narratives that made the ancient Hebrew Exodus an entirely relevant story, for example, to mid-nineteenth-century American abolitionists and mid-twentieth-century civil rights activists. Likewise, it was the transposability of narratives that made the early New England Puritan jeremiads—sermons about original calling, subsequent unfaithfulness, and need for sincere repentance—the discursive framework of many important subsequent movements, from Sabbath laws campaigns to the protest movement against the Vietnam War. These and many other key narratives have exerted huge influences, through their transposable adaptability, on the defining cultural categories that have shaped action in the West and in America.

Finally, the discussion thus far has emphasized big narratives about the world and the cosmos. But narratives operate at many levels and in many layers. People’s lives are also always constituted and guided by smaller, sometimes autobiographical narratives of personal existence and experience. Narratives not only provide “big picture” frameworks of life but likewise help to construct more specific and personal accounts and themes of meaning, purpose, and explanation in life. Big narratives often have links of meaning to smaller narratives, but not always or clearly so. Thus people’s lives and identities may not only be situated within the American Experiment or Christian narratives, for instance, but at other levels their experience is viewed and explained through narratives about the loss of jobs, political activism, immigration, the fairness of laws, encounters of love or violence, recovery from trauma, motherhood, organizational identities, sexual experiences, religious conversions, and more.

This multilevel and multilayered nature of narratives helps to account for the pervasiveness and centrality of narratives in the composition, direction, and interpretation of human life.

Narrative, Identity, and the Sacred

Emile Durkheim rightly taught that every social order has at its core the sacred. Social orders are not merely populations carrying on instrumentally functional institutions. Rather, social orders ultimately are held together and set into motion by particular ideas and ideals about themselves that comprise their collective identities. It is these collective identities that give social orders their essential locations, orientations, and significance in the larger world. “A society can neither create itself nor recreate itself,” wrote Durkheim, “without at the same time creating an ideal…For a society is not made up merely of the mass of individuals who compose it, the ground which they occupy, the things which they use, and the movements which they perform, but above all of the idea which it forms of itself.” And the center of any collective identity is not instrumental functionality but believed-in ideals and images that are sacred—that are, for the social order, set apart, hallowed, protected, inviolable.

Durkheim’s reductionistic suggestion that all religions are ultimately nothing but the worship of sacred social ideals is highly debatable. The connection of the sacred and the social, however, when
viewed through the other end of the telescope, may hit closer to the mark: that all social orders are in a sense ultimately religious, in having sacreds at heart, in the form of sacrosancts set apart from the ordinary and profane through and by which the social orders live, move, and have their being. This is arguably true in the historical sense that civilizations are repeatedly founded on religions. According to Peter Berger, “Originally all cosmization had a sacred character. This remains true through most of human history…. Viewed historically, most of man’s worlds have been sacred worlds. Indeed, it appears likely that only by way of the sacred was it possible for man to conceive of a cosmos in the first place.”[9] It is also true in a cultural sense, that the broader categories of interpretive meaning that animate any society are organized at bottom in relation to sacred moral order. This is precisely the point that Robert Bellah, for example, makes in his piece “Is There a Common American Culture?”—that America is religiously committed to the sacredness of the individual conscience, whether in the form of Roger Williams’s sectarian Baptist faith or of the modern, secular, liberal, political activist.[10]

But we should note that the sacred ideals that define social orders do not float freely in the sky of ideas, like arbitrary clumps of ideas and beliefs that somehow happen to get invested with religious qualities. Rather, the sacred at the heart of any social order is always embedded in and arising from its collective narratives. It is the story that constructs the ideal. It is the narrative that defines the sacred. Thus the individual conscience is sacred in America not because of some random happenstance but because the larger American Experiment story narrates it for us as sacred. It is not some abstract and random national commitment per se that makes it so but rather the particular national recounting of what is true and important in the narrative form of actors, context, plot, action, conflict, and resolution.

This is in part what it means to suggest that we not only are animals who make and tell narratives but also animals who are told and made by our narratives. The stories we tell are not mere entertainment. Nor do they simply suggest for us some general sense of our heritage. Our stories fully encompass and define our lives. They situate us in reality itself, by elaborating the contours of fundamental moral order, comprising sacred and profane, in narrative form, and placing us too as actors within the larger drama. Our individual and collective lives come to have meaning and purpose insofar as they join the larger cast of characters enacting, reenacting, and perpetuating the larger narrative. It is by finding ourselves placed within a particular drama that we come to know our role, our part, our lines in life—how we are to act, why, and what meaning that has in a larger scheme of reality.

Seeing the connections between narrative, the sacred, culture, and identity helps to make clear why and how human animals mark time together. Humans are not content simply to let the earth revolve around the sun from season to season and to carry out their instrumentally functional tasks within seasons. Instead, humans always and everywhere use time to invest time and their lives with meaning through stories. Moral, believing animals recurrently mark time by designating particular dates and seasons that recall what for them is hallowed by invoking and retelling their particular narratives. This is crucial in sustaining the collective identities within which individual identities can be known and lived.

Moral, believing Americans, for example, mark each of the earth’s revolutions around the sun with holidays—etymologically, “holy days,” not incidentally—that retell our stories about Martin Luther King, Jr.; Abraham Lincoln; George Washington; American soldiers who have fought and died; the Declaration of Independence from Britain; the laborers who built our economy; Christopher Columbus; the first Thanksgiving; Pearl Harbor; and Christmas. Diverse American subcultures also overlay these holy days by marking time in celebrating—etymologically, “solemnizing”—Saint Patrick, Passover, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter, Holocaust Remembrance, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Halloween, Diwali, All Saint’s Day, Hanukkah, Ramadan, Advent, and so on.

What is obvious is that these national holy days do not center on abstract concepts or propositional arguments. They all center on and recall narratives, told and retold stories about the struggle for civil rights, Washington chopping down a cherry tree and not lying to his father about it, Lincoln and slavery and the Union, the Revolution, celebrating the New World’s harvest bounty with Indians, our entry into World War II, and so on. The stories are not mere excuses for getting time away from work. The stories
define who we are as a people are, what we are here for, how we ought to live, what we ought to feel, what is good and bad, right and wrong, just and unjust, worthy and unworthy, sacred and profane. This is not only true of Americans. All humans everywhere—from the Shia Muslims in the Near East to the natives of Tahiti to Inuits in the Arctic—do the same thing in their particular ways. (The cynic might say that few of these holidays mean very little to him or her and many others; I would suggest they seriously propose national legislation to wipe these holidays off the calendar and replace them with generic days off from work every three weeks, and see what kind of reception that evokes.)

To some degree, the centrality of narrative throws a different light on our theories of culture. Older anthropological theories, for instance, tended to speak of culture as sum total collections of learned knowledge and human artifacts that people needed to master to function in society. Thus Edward Tylor wrote in 1871 that culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”[1] Sort of an all-this-and-the-kitchen-sink approach. But recognizing the ordering role of narrative in culture helps to bring some coherence to this list of items; it helps us to see some of the connections and patterns across and within these cultural elements. To some extent, the norms, values, beliefs, symbols, laws, customs, and so on are not simply a jumble of discreet elements in a cultural grab bag. Many of them are at least loosely linked together in some meaningful way by the particular narratives that orient and direct the culture or subculture.

A similar argument applies to some more recent theories, such as Ann Swidler’s “Culture in Action” theory, discussed hereafter, which employs the cultural “toolkit” metaphor.[2] The idea of cultural tools nicely highlights the potential of strategies of action to be put to use to achieve various purposes. What the image tends to obscure, however, is the essential narrative constitution and ordering of culture. Tools are mere practical instruments for manipulating the physical world. Cultures, however, are epics, dramas, parables, legends, allegories. The meanings and motivations of culture are matters not finally of practical accomplishment but emplotted moral significance.

More generally, this book has argued that human culture and motivation to action are not at bottom instrumentally functional or practically rational matters but rather are very much normative concerns. It is orientation to moral order, I have suggested, and not innate acquisitiveness or functional practicality that most powerfully moves and guides human action. If it were otherwise, as Marshall Sahlins has suggested, then Americans would eat dogs as readily as they eat cows—as some cultures indeed do. Dog meat is, after all, nutritious and could be produced for market quite economically—especially if dog pounds and animal shelters proved cooperative. But, as Marshall Sahlins astutely notes, “America is the land of the sacred dog,” so we can never even consider eating dog. The very thought cannot stand in our minds. Eating dog is taboo, a violation of something sacred in our moral order. Still, this chapter does part ways with Sahlins in suggesting that the organizing principles behind the normative orders of culture are openly narrative in form, more contingent, and not rooted in some deep, complex cognitive structure, as Sahlins, if I understand him correctly, would seem to have it (and that it is the structural anthropologist’s job to uncover). Cultures and motivations are not random, arbitrary, inexplicable jumbles of categories and ideas, not even assorted collections of cultural tools in toolkits. Yet that is not because of the ordering power of some given “deep structure” but rather because culture and motivation are generated and sustained by various narrative constitutions of what for moral, believing animals is real, significant, and good. The normative is thus organized by the narrative.

The most fundamental point here is this: narrative is our most elemental human genre of communication and meaning-making, an essential way of framing the order and purpose of reality, that we moderns need and use every bit as much as our primitive ancestors. Most other forms of abstract, rational, analytical discourse are always rooted in, contextualized by, and significant because of the underlying stories that narrate our lives. If so, then scholarly disciplines that study human life, such as sociology, will most fundamentally need to engage in practices that are closer to the work of literary interpretation than mathematical prediction—whatever loss of scientific status that may involve.”[3]
The Narratives of American Sociology

The discipline of American sociology itself provides an example of the ways big stories actually undergird and make important human practices that themselves appear on the surface to be unrelated to the mythical constitution of reality. Mainstream sociology understands itself to be a kind of science of human social life. It employs rational, systematic methods of empirical data collection and hypothesis testing to make valid and reliable claims about social facts, processes, relationships, and structures. Sociology is concerned to minimize biases in sampling and observation, to replicate findings, to build bodies of generalizable theory, to describe and analyze human social behaviors and practices in ways undistorted by the potential interests and prejudices of the sociologist’s particularistic ideology or tradition—perhaps even to be “objective.” This is the sociological center, around which also encamp a variety of more “critical,” “interpretive,” and feminist schools of sociology, which in different ways claim to contest some of these features of the mainstream.

But what most if not all of these versions of American sociology have in common—however scientific versus “critical” they may be—is that they are ultimately animated, energized, and made significant by one of two historical narrative traditions. Apart from these two narrative traditions, sociology itself would hold little human interest to anyone. Why should any but a few technical experts care about significance tests, field notes, network structures, oversampling techniques, or interaction effects? It all means nothing without a larger context and purpose, neither of which sociology itself could possibly supply. Instead, if and when sociological work is compelling, it is usually because sociology is being carried along by one of two extrascientific narratives—one an optimistic, mobilizing story; the other a fairly cynical, unmasking story. The first I will call the narrative of Liberal Progress, the second of Ubiquitous Egoism; the former narrates reality roughly as follows.

Once upon a time, the vast majority of human persons suffered in societies and social institutions that were unjust, unhealthy, repressive, and oppressive. These traditional societies were reprehensible because of their deep-rooted inequality, exploitation, and irrational traditionalism—all of which made life very unfair, unpleasant, and short. But the noble human aspiration for autonomy, equality, and prosperity struggled mightily against the forces of misery and oppression, and eventually succeeded in establishing modern, liberal, democratic, capitalist, welfare societies. While modern social conditions hold the potential to maximize the individual freedom and pleasure of all, there is much work to be done to dismantle the powerful vestiges of inequality, exploitation, and repression. This struggle for the good society in which individuals are equal and free to pursue their self-defined happiness is the one mission truly worth dedicating one’s life to achieving.

For sociologists whose scholarship and teaching is embedded within and offered in the service of this liberal progress narrative, the important tasks are clear. Studies in nearly every field of the discipline—but particularly in the areas of social stratification, race and ethnicity, sex and gender, poverty, work and occupations, family, economic sociology—must work to identify privilege, exploitation, prejudice, and unequal opportunity in order to inform cultural practices and policy and legislative reforms that will make society more free, equal, and fulfilling for its individual members. In particular, this means identifying and critiquing class inequality, racism, sexism, heterosexism, corporate exploitation, and other forms of discrimination, privilege, and injustice.

For some sociologists, this struggle takes the form of rigorous quantitative analyses—for example, of the causes of poverty, the dynamics of welfare use, the prevalence of dead-end jobs, the correlates of teenage pregnancy—whose findings speak to politicians, technocrats, and other institutional leaders. In the best case, one’s work provides the intellectual backbone of some actual policy initiative, the movement toward which ideally involves an invitation to present one’s research findings at a congressional hearing on Capitol Hill. Other versions of sociological scholarship in the service of the liberal progress narrative analyze the historical movement and dynamics of liberal progress itself. These include cross-national research on factors influencing democratization, historical analyses of civil rights movements, comparative studies of international poverty and development, and so on. For yet other,
more “critical” sociologists, the liberal progress narrative animates scholarship of a more prophetic style, unmasking and denouncing the racism inherent in the criminal justice system, the sexism embedded in consumer capitalism and patriarchal family structures, the class exploitation of the service economy, the heterosexism pervading routine social practices and legal systems, the militarism entrenched in masculine culture and corporate America, et cetera. Sociologists of this latter style pride themselves for their progressive and radical analyses, said to be more critical and systemic than those their merely liberal, more mainstream colleagues produce. What they seem less aware of, however, is the common underlying liberal progress narrative that animates and makes significant all of these bodies of work as a whole.

But sociology’s underlying story is not always about difficult but forward-looking progress and emancipation. Alongside of sociology’s primary narrative of liberal progress is its secondary narrative of Ubiquitous Egoism, which can be told something like this:

Once upon a time, people believed that human self-centeredness was a moral flaw needing correction through ethical and spiritual discipline toward self-sacrificial love for neighbor and commitment to the common good. Even today, many people believe this. But as noble as it sounds, more perceptive and honest thinkers have come to see the cold, hard, simple fact that, beneath all apparent expressions of love and altruism, all human motives and concerns are really self-interested. In fact, notions such as love and self-sacrifice themselves have been tools of manipulation and advantage in the hands of Machiavellian actors. Idealists persist in affirming moral commitment to the welfare of others, but they are naive and misguided. Truly honest and courageous people who have intellectually “come of age” are increasingly disabusing themselves of such illusions and learning to be satisfied with the substitute idealism of helping to build the best society possible, given the constraints of ubiquitous rational egoism.

Sociologists whose teaching and research is formed by the ubiquitous egoism narrative sometimes tend toward technocratic interests in rational, quasi-utilitarian institutional reforms and interventions. How, they ask, can we build better schools and antipoverty programs based on the assumptions of rational egoism? Other sociologists who pursue their scholarly lives within this story play the role of the dramatic unmasker—prophetically exposing the hidden, selfish pleasures and privileges present in what appear to be activities of love and altruism, such as marriage, family, and social movement activism. Yet other sociologists in this vein are more matter-of-fact in their work, detached from the passions of reform and unmasking, in view of the powerful moral leveling that ubiquitous rational egoism effects. Their pleasure is simply the interest of the intellectual craft that sustains their career, particularly in being able to provide unromantic, comprehensive explanations for all aspects of human social life.

These, then, are the two dominant narratives that ultimately animate and make meaningful most of the work of contemporary American sociology—however dryly objective and rigorously scientific it may at times seem to the contrary. Liberal Progress and Ubiquitous Egoism are clearly distinct in plot and style. The first is an inspiring drama, the second a more sobering satire. But their differences should not obscure their common source, both deriving from the master narrative of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European Enlightenment. One story emphasizes the emancipatory elements of revolutionary and rationalistic Enlightenment; the other accentuates aspects of the skeptical and utilitarian streams of the Enlightenment. [14]

Insofar as the Enlightenment itself was in good measure a renarration of Christianity in secular terms, the two narratives animating contemporary American sociology reflect the optimistic and pessimistic themes that Christianity’s theological anthropology united but the Enlightenment split apart. The uncomfortable tension and paradox of the Christian theology of human nature and history have become deeply ingrained in Western culture and consciousness. That is, on the one hand humans are seen as creatures made in the image of God, possessing an almost divine dignity and glory and destined through grace and redemption to flourish in community and love on earth and in heaven. On the other hand and simultaneously, humans are seen as wickedly sinful, suffering the dreadful consequences of self-inflicted depravity and rebellion against God and so inclined toward deep and sustained self-centeredness, pride, alienation, hatred, and self-destruction. This paradox, which orthodox Christianity always held in dynamic tension, the Enlightenment pried apart and stripped of the divine. In the end, the
Liberal Progress narrative is a secularized retelling of the righteous half and Ubiquitous Egoism of the other, sinful half. Since the Enlightenment, we in the West no longer have had to live with the complexity and discomfort inherent in the Christian paradoxical view of humanity. We can decide instead simply to be either credulously optimistic or cynically pessimistic. [15] Either way, sociology provides an attractive academic means through which to live out those narratives.

It may be worth noting that in previous decades sociology also comprised a third narrative tradition that animated significant work in the discipline. This third story was rooted in German and English Romanticism, which was itself a reaction against the rationalism and skepticism of the Enlightenment. We might call it the Community Lost narrative and retell it like this:

Once upon a time, folk lived together in local, face-to-face communities where we knew and took care of each other. Life was simple and sometimes hard. But we lived in harmony with nature, laboring honestly at the plough and in handcraft. Life was securely woven in homespun fabrics of organic, integrated culture, faith, and tradition. We truly knew who we were and felt deeply for our land, our kin, our customs. But then a dreadful thing happened. Folk community was overrun by the barbarisms of modern industry, urbanization, rationality, science, fragmentation, anonymity, transience, and mass production. Faith began to erode, social trust dissipate, folk customs vanish. Work became alienating, authentic feeling repressed, neighbors strangers, and life standardized and rationalized. Those who knew the worth of simplicity, authentic feeling, nature, and custom resisted the vulgarities and uniformities of modernity. But all that remains today are tattered vestiges of a world we have lost. The task of those who see clearly now is to memorialize and celebrate folk community, mourn its ruin, and resist and denounce the depravities of modern, scientific rationalism that would kill the Human Spirit.

In contrast to the inspiring drama of Liberal Progress and the sobering satire of Ubiquitous Egoism, the Community Lost narrative is a nostalgic tragedy evoking melancholy and dissent for those who have told and lived it. It renarrates in secular terms not the sundered elements of the Christian theology of human nature but the Jewish and Christian story of paradise lost, of original sin, of the serpent in the Garden. Within sociology, the Community Lost story has animated whole schools of social theory and generated entire research programs in urban and community sociology and studies of immigration. It has provided much of the gut-level appeal of secularization theory in the sociology of religion and sustained some sociological interest in theorizing the arts, particularly in exploring the potential redemptive power of poetry and visual art. One hears strong echoes of Community Lost in the works of Tunnies, Weber, Maine, Simmel, Wirth, Adorno, Marcuse, Nisbet, and others up through the 1970s.

But Community Lost is a narrative that itself has lost much of its appeal to contemporary sociologists since the 1980s. It’s tragic, backward-looking romanticism offers much less narrative appeal than sociology’s dominant Liberal Progress story, at least in the current social context. It is, after all, much more alluring and meaningful—particularly in a post-Christian culture still haunted with feelings for a redemptive kingdom—to struggle valiantly through one’s profession for progressive equality and emancipation than to document and mourn the loss of a harmony, innocence, and authentic feeling that can never be regained. So the Community Lost myth has somewhat receded into the background in sociology. Whether social and cultural disruptions—like those of the Sixties that gave rise to the neoromantic commune and “back to the land” movements of that era (and sociological studies of them)—might revive the Community Lost narrative again among sociologists of the future is an open question. But Community Lost is not one of sociology’s dominant myths at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Whatever the particular narratives are that undergird the sociological enterprise, the more basic point here is that sociologists in their work are no less than other humans the makers, tellers, and believers of narrative construals of existence, history, and purpose. Sociologists not only make stories but are animals who are made by their stories. They also tell and retell myths that themselves come fundamentally to constitute and direct their professional work and, often, their personal lives. They, like all people, most fundamentally understand what reality is, who they are, and how they ought to live by locating themselves within the larger narratives and metanarratives that they hear and tell, which constitute that which is for them real and significant. No one, not even the statistics-laden sociologist,
escapes the moral, believing, narrative-constituted condition of the human animal.

**Where That Leaves Us**

The problem with a narratological understanding of human persons— and probably an important reason modern people resist thinking of themselves as ultimately storytelling and believing and incarnating animals— is that it is difficult rationally to adjudicate between divergent stories. How do you tell which one is more deserving of assent and commitment than others? The American Experiment narrative will probably appeal to more readers of this book than the Militant Islamic Resurgence narrative. Why? Because objective, empirical evidence proves that it is a truer story? Not really. For what is evidence is itself largely made significant, if not constituted for us, by our narratives. Which is why why few readers of this book could ever in the short run convince with empirical evidence a militant Muslim to drop his or her mission and believe and live out the American Experiment story instead. Such Muslims’ big story makes them read the same “facts” quite differently from most Americans, who simply believe a different story.

Does this mean we must all become relativists, perhaps even tolerant nihilists? Must we throw up our hands and declare that since no story can be truly neutrally evaluated or entirely empirically adjudicated that therefore all stories are equally valid (or invalid)?

First, we simply cannot do that, even if we wanted to. That is an anthropological impossibility. Nobody is really a relativist, no matter what they say. Scratch hard enough—usually it doesn’t take much—and one discovers that hard-core “relativists” are in fact believers and actors in some story or other. That is just the kind of animal we are. Nobody can simply exempt himself or herself from the human condition. We must narrate and believe and live out stories, and we do narrate and believe and live out stories, inevitably. In the end, it appears, our stories are not so much at the disposal of our lives, as we choose to construct our lives. Rather, our lives are more profoundly constructed by the stories that encompass and compose them. Our lives are only ever meaningful because we know the particular big and small stories into which they fit, even if we are not always aware of that, per se. We ourselves become minor but significant actors in the larger drama, even when the drama seems to us perfectly real. And maybe it is. In this sense, relativism is not an option. It is only an apparent option, which itself could only make sense within a particular life-forming narrative about freedom, choice, and enlightenment. Sartrean existentialism, Enlightenment liberalism, and similar stories thus turn out to be forms of bad faith. Not because we pretend we have no choices when in fact we have many but rather because we pretend we have many choices when in fact we have few. Objective, rational, definitive appraisals of narratives is impossible. But escape from our narrative construals of reality is impossible too. We turn out simply to be more caught, more stuck, more dependent in fact than the modern story of the autonomously choosing self, which we have believed and have tried to live out, could ever let on.

Yet that does not directly answer the question. For our empirical inability to live as relativists does not preclude the theoretical possibility that, in principle, we still possess no capacity to talk across our narratives in ways that might in some meaningful manner adjudicate between them. It is worth realizing that none of us finally are relativists in actuality. But that does not necessarily mean that our actual situation is not a relativistic one in which any discussion between and evaluations of different narratives is finally impossible. We are committed, moral, believing animals who do not have at our disposal a universal, indubitable foundation of knowledge by which to judge our own and others’ beliefs and stories neutrally, objectively, and definitively. So does that mean we must despair of meaningful discussion across human differences, of even trying to offer reasonable accounts for why one life-constituting story may be preferable to another? I think not.

Lived experience provides some starting-point clues here. It is true that people have an immensely difficult, sometimes impossible time convincing each other of the truth of their positions. It is also true that many contemporary moral debates are emotivist and seemingly interminable in character. Yet people nevertheless keep on discussing and arguing and sometimes—often slowly and with great
difficulty—actually seem to get somewhere, despite the lack of a universal, indubitable foundation of Truth. Sometimes, though not always, people come better to understand their own and others’ views through arguments with rivals. In some cases, people revise their own views because of rivals’ challenges. At times, people actually discard their previous commitments, modify their assumptions, and embrace new beliefs. And sometimes people even undergo wholesale conversion to entirely different worldviews. If meaningful discussion, persuasion, and adjudication between different presuppositions and narratives was literally impossible, none of these things could happen. Nor would my writing and your reading this book (and very many other books) itself be anything but a complete waste of time. For, precisely because of my own particularistic commitments, I write this book as an attempt to challenge the assumptions and commitments of rival approaches to social theory to try to persuade readers to embrace the alternative perspective advanced here. These observations together suggest that we do possess at least some ways partially to adjudicate between rival presuppositions and narratives in some cases, at least, even if never with certainty or from a neutral or objective standpoint. Rivals in fact do find persuasive things to say to each other, even about their basic assumptions and dearest stories, and on that basis they sometimes alter their views and commitments.

It is beyond the scope of this book to elaborate theoretically how, why, and when rival presuppositions and narratives might be engaged and judged. But it is worth briefly noting what are at least some efforts in different fields to undertake just that project. In the field of moral philosophy, for example, Jeffrey Stout has elaborated an approach to meaningful moral deliberation in a morally pluralistic situation, arguing that “the facts of moral diversity don’t compel us to become nihilists or skeptics, to abandon the notions or moral truth and justified moral belief.” According to Stout, it is difficult, but not impossible, to find a middle ground between the extremes of “complete loss of confidence” and “aspiration to a God’s-eye view” when it comes to moral truth, and his book suggests ways to help find that middle ground. [18] Alasdair MacIntyre, working with a tradition-centered epistemology, suggests means by which traditions may engage and evaluate each other: “Is there any way in which one of these rivals might prevail over the others? One possible answer was supplied by Dante: that narrative prevails over its rivals which is able to include its rivals within it, not only to retell their stories as episodes within its story, but to tell the story of the telling of their stories as such episodes.”[19] In the philosophy of science, Roy Bhaskar and colleagues have developed a philosophy of “critical realism” that affirms the existence of a real, common, external reality that observers can actually study and know, even given the influences of their own particularistic human perceptions and commitments; thus human understandings of the world are not wholly constructed in terms of the influences of particular human perceptions and interpretations but rather have some capacity to commonly access an external reality that itself can substantively inform common understanding.[20] Likewise, Imre Lakatos has sought to develop an understanding of knowledge that discards positivist assumptions and recognizes human and historical aspects of scientific inquiry yet does not accede to antirealism. Lakatos pursues this by reformulating Kuhn’s concept of incommensurate paradigms into the idea of a “methodology of scientific research program” that denies the incommensurability of large-scale theories, thus defending the rationality of theory change among scientists.[21] The philosopher of science Larry Laudan has advanced a similar kind of argument.[22] Even in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, chemist turned philosopher of science Michael Polanyi was similarly exploring compelling ways that scholars might reasonably adjudicate between competing theoretical frameworks of knowledge while taking very seriously the personal, tacit, and faith-like character of scientific knowing.[23]

The point here is not that any of these authors have definitively answered the question and settled the matter. The point, rather, is that the discussion does not end with Kuhn and Feyerabend, or with Stanley Fish or Richard Rorty,[24] for that matter. The positivist program is philosophically dead. The strong foundationalism that underwrote a supposedly universal rationality that definitively adjudicated between human differences is dead. But this does not necessarily throw us into the tribal power struggles of utter relativism. The narratological and presuppositionalist views advanced here do not necessarily lead to the
kinds of antirealism, skepticism, or nihilism that end meaningful debates across human presuppositions and stories. Instead, it helps us to own up to some of the reasons why those debates are so difficult, and to learn to carry on those debates in ways more appropriate to our condition as moral, believing animals.

Shifting focus somewhat, practically speaking, more important than the issue of adjudicating between rival narratives is the problem of learning how to live with each other, how to deliberate civilly about our common human life together, given that we often do live, move, and have our being within different narratives. Note that this issue is not important to everyone and for all narratives, but it most likely will be to most readers of this book and certainly is to its author. Thus the challenge for moral, believing animals on this earth is finally not how to work out which among ours is the one true story but rather and more immediately figuring out how to talk and live together, given the fact of our different stories.

This is the challenge of civil pluralism. Given what this and previous chapters have argued, this can only be possible not because a universally shared Reason underlies all of our narratives but rather because many particularistic narratives contain within themselves the resources for living civilly with difference. Both Christianity and Islam, for example, are narratives that do make absolute and universal claims and have well-known histories—as do many other traditions—of persecuting difference. But Christianity and Islam also equally possess their own internal theological resources with which to live civilly with real difference. All of the same might be said of many other religious and secular narratives. Thus confronting the inescapably enstoried nature of our lives does not have to lead to violent and oppressive tribal power struggles of utter relativism. While fully living within our truly different narratives, we might still draw on our narratives to learn to live together in some measure of peace.

In any case, to whatever extent and in whatever ways we are able to adjudicate between and live with our differing, constituting presuppositions and narratives, we can and should at least be aware of our stories, and of ourselves as animals who make and are made by our stories. And when we moderns tell our stories about how we have evolved beyond our primitive storytelling ancestors, we can, with some honesty, at least wink and nod about the irony of it all. Some may have succumbed to the particular modern story about the absolute chance and purposelessness of everything, which Bertrand Russell summed up nicely at the start of the twentieth century with this faith-based quasi-narrative:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man’s achievements must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.[25]

But for those of us who have not succumbed to this story, we may hold out some hope, perhaps even the conviction, that life and the cosmos really are significant, that in the fabric of reality there really is out there The Story, of which some of our stories are but telling echoes.

Endnotes

Chapter 4


