

This post is part of a series on the 'history of social sciences'.

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One of the debates that haunts the social sciences is the debate about what is innate and what is acquired, what is universal and what is variable, or what belongs to nature and what belongs to culture. This debate has become central in the last decades thanks to the advances of the cognitive sciences and of evolutionary theories. By providing a new way to describe the unconscious and deep structure of the mind and their emergence during human history, these disciplines have made the debate over nature and nurture inevitable.

For this reason, you might think that the current debate is brand new and that it represents a new page in the history of social sciences. Certainly it is new, but maybe not so new.

Consider Montaigne's famous quotation in his [Essays](#):

"In some places men feed upon humane flesh, and in others, where it is deemed an office of pietie in children to kill their fathers at a certaine age: in other places fathers appoint what children shall live and be preserved, and which die and be cast out, whilst they are yet in their mothers wombe: where old husbands lend their wives to young men, for what use soever they please: In other places, where al women are common without sinne or offence: yea in some places, where for a badge of honour they weare as many frienged tassels, fastened to the skirt of their garment, as they have laine with severall men".



Picture: Cannibalism in 1557 as told by Hans Staden.

Montaigne concludes:

"The laws of conscience, which we say to proceed from nature, rise and proceed of custome; every man holding in special regard and inward veneration the opinions approved, and custo mes received about him, cannot without remorse leave them, nor without applause applie himselfe unto them".

This looks like the classic culturalist thesis: everything is cultural, nothing is universal and humans

are governed by customs (or "non-content biases" - such as conformism and imitation - as we would say today). See for instance Shweder's view about morality:

"On the basis of the historical and ethnographic records, we know that different people in different times and places have found it quite natural to be spontaneously appaled, outraged, indignant, proud, disgusted, guilty and ashamed by all sorts of things: masturbation, homosexuality, sexual abstinence, polygamy, abortion, circuncision, corporal punishment, capital punishment, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, capitalism, democracy, flag burning, miniskirts, long hair, no hair, alcohol consumption, meat eating, medical inoculations, atheism, idol worship, divorce, widow remarriage, arrange marriage, romantic love marriage, parents and children sleeping in the same bed, parents and children not sleeping in the same bed, women being allowed to work, women not being allowed to work". (Shweder, 1994, p. 26)

So the debate is not that new, and reading Smith, one discovers that the response to the culturalist thesis is not new either. In his [Theory of Moral Sentiments](#), he takes the most spectacular example of moral diversity:

"Can there be greater barbarity for example, than to hurt an infant? Its helplessness, its innocence, its amiableness, call forth the compassion, even of an enemy, and not to spare that tender age is regarded as the most furious effort of an enraged and cruel conqueror. What then should we imagine must be the heart of a parent who could injure that weakness which even a furious enemy is afraid to violate?"

How can we explain such an atrocity? Doesn't this stand as evidence that human customs are infinitely variable? Smith shows that such a practice is not at odds with the idea that humans are endowed with a moral sense:

"The extreme indigence of a savage is often such that he himself is frequently exposed to the greatest extremity of hunger, he often dies of pure want, and it is frequently impossible for him to support both himself and his child. We cannot wonder, therefore, that in this case he should abandon it. One who, in flying from an enemy, whom it was impossible to resist, should throw down his infant, because it retarded his flight, would surely be excusable; since, by attempting to save it, he could only hope for the consolation of dying with it".

Smith's analysis is very close to modern anthropological works. Discussing the relativist thesis, and in particular the specular example of the people who kill their parents, [Redfield](#) notes:

"The Eskimo who walled up an aged parent in a snow house and left him to die, did so because in their hard, migratory life the old person could no longer travel, endangered his close kinsmen by his presence, and perhaps himself endured an almost unbearable existence. Furthermore, good reporters of actual cases of these assisted suicides—for that they were, rather than homicides—show the tenderness, even the filial respect, with which the thing was done" (1959 quoted by Lukes 2007)

Redfield goes on concluding that "Seen in context, most customs then showed reasonableness, a fitness with much of the life, that allowed the outsider more easily to understand and more reluctantly to condemn". Moreover, as Smith pointed out, we can find such practices even in the West:

"The exposition, that is, the murder of new-born infants, was a practice allowed of in almost all the states of Greece, even among the polite and civilized Athenians; and whenever the circumstances of the parent rendered it inconvenient to bring up the child, to abandon it to hunger, or to wild beasts, was regarded without blame or censure. This practice had probably begun in times of the most

savage barbarity. The imaginations of men had been first made familiar with it in that earliest period of society, and the uniform continuance of the custom had hindered them afterwards from perceiving its enormity."



Smith's argument fits very well with today's view on the moral sense. Imagine that evolution (for whatever reasons, for the individual or for their group) has favoured a 'moral module' that aims to help people avoid inflicting harm to others. This moral module needs a lot of inputs to properly decide which action is harmful and which is not. And depending on these informations, the moral module won't deliver the same decision.

That's exactly what Steven Pinker wrote for instance on the "moral instinct" in the [New York Times](#). We all have a moral instinct, but our moral judgments depend on our (highly variable) views of the world:

"Until recently, it was understood that some people didn't enjoy smoking or avoided it because it was hazardous to their health. But with the discovery of the harmful effects of secondhand smoke, smoking is now treated as immoral. Smokers are ostracized; images of people smoking are censored; and entities touched by smoke are felt to be contaminated (so hotels have not only nonsmoking rooms but nonsmoking floors). The desire for retribution has been visited on tobacco companies, who have been slapped with staggering "punitive damages".

"This wave of amoralization has led the cultural right to lament that morality itself is under assault, as we see in the group that anointed itself the Moral Majority. In fact there seems to be a Law of Conservation of Moralization, so that as old behaviors are taken out of the moralized column, new ones are added to it. Dozens of things that past generations treated as practical matters are now ethical battlegrounds, including disposable diapers, I.Q. tests, poultry farms, Barbie dolls and research on breast cancer. Food alone has become a minefield, with critics sermonizing about the size of sodas, the chemistry of fat, the freedom of chickens, the price of coffee beans, the species of fish and now the distance the food has traveled from farm to plate".

In the same piece, Steven Pinker notices that this very dependence of the moral instinct on upstream modules that analyze the situation lead us to very predictable biases:

"We don't show contempt to the man who fails to change the batteries in his smoke alarms or takes his family on a driving vacation, both of which multiply the risk they will die in an accident. Driving a gas-guzzling Hummer is reprehensible, but driving a gas-guzzling old Volvo is not; eating a Big Mac is unconscionable, but not imported cheese or crème brûlée".



What is the worst? An old Volvo or a new Hummer?

In other words, the danger of a Hummer is cognitively easier to detect, that of a Swedish Volvo is a bit harder. To conclude, I don't know whether Smith had Montaigne in mind but he also has a response to the "frienged tassels, fastened to the skirt of their garment".

"In China if a lady's foot is so large as to be fit to walk upon, she is regarded as a monster of ugliness. Some of the savage nations in North-America tie four boards round the heads of their children, and thus squeeze them, while the bones are tender and gristly, into a form that is almost perfectly square. Europeans are astonished at the absurd barbarity of this practice, to which some missionaries have imputed the singular stupidity of those nations among whom it prevails. But when they condemn those savages, they do not reflect that the ladies in Europe had, till within these very few years, been endeavouring, for near a century past, to squeeze the beautiful roundness of their natural shape into a square form of the same kind. And that, notwithstanding the many distortions and diseases which this practice was known to occasion, custom had rendered it agreeable among some of the most civilized nations which, perhaps, the world ever beheld."



Picture: Two ways of distorting women's bodies

(For those interested by this topic, I can't help but recommend the wonderful analysis of the emergence of foot-binding and infibulation by Mackie. Copies available [here](#)).