

A fourth solution to a Victorian anthropology paradox: underdeterminism

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Abstract. Historian of anthropology George Stocking tells us: from the point of view of parts of the Victorian middle class, Victorian society was highly evolved yet also contained savage components. Why don't they change their ways, or why didn't they? There is a Quinean solution.

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Paradoxes were of much interest in ancient Greece and also preoccupy various philosophers today. But what about in Victorian times? One imagines the period as a time of lengthy novels, or at least I do. But were there philosophers and others busy trying to solve paradoxes then. I bet there were! Historian of anthropology George W. Stocking Junior tells us of a paradox which some members of the Victorian middle classes felt:

The survival of such “savagery” in a world of unprecedented progress was one of the more disturbing of the cultural paradoxes experienced by thoughtful members of the Victorian middle classes. (1987: 214)

Why did Victorian society contain savage groups, given the opportunity of becoming civilized members of Victorian society?

There is an obvious solution, once you have read W.V. Quine's most famous paper. (It is distinct from the previous ones!) If a middle class Victorian parent tells a so-called savage parent, “Why don't you bring up your child by doing this rather than what you are currently doing?” and gives evidence, it is not the case that this evidence challenges a single belief of the savage: that a certain practice is the way to bring up a

child. Rather the savage has a whole system of beliefs and the evidence challenges the system as a whole, but it does not determine what must be altered to cope with the evidence. There are always multiple available revisions. And the savage never makes a revision which, given their desires, would lead them to adopt the middle class recommendation. For example, they used to say, “Spare the stick, spoil the child,” or the rod, and now they conclude that sparing the stick can work if you have highly sensitive children; but they don’t! They don’t conclude that there is some general alternative to using the stick.

References

Quine, W.V. 1951. Two Dogmas of Empiricism. *The Philosophical Review* 60 (1): 20-43.

Stocking Jr., G.W. 1987. *Victorian Anthropology*. New York: The Free Press.