

## The End of Moral Relativity

### Introduction

How many think cheating is wrong? How many think most people in this room have cheated before? How would you like to live in a world where you couldn't trust anyone? Friends you made told lies about you. You make a new friend who tells you they drive a BMW and like the same movies you do. Later you find out that they drive an old car and like pornographic movies. (Of course this assumes that you don't like pornographic movies.) If these things were commonplace, would you like this kind of world?

What have you meant when you said 'everything is relative'. You have meant that there were no absolute moral standards, no moral laws like the scientific Law of Gravity which we must accept. (If you don't accept that law, try jumping out of a 10 story building sometime.) So therefore all choices, all questions about right and wrong, such as adoption by LBG (Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgender) families, is a matter of personal values. What you mean by 'everything is relative' is that all values are relative for each person.

### Enough is Enough

I have finally heard "(moral) values are relative" enough that I must make a response: I reject relativism. (Note that when I refer to values, this will imply moral values. By the same token I am not going to attempt to make distinctions between culture and society.) Not only is it wrong, there are absolute values, it is also wrong because it's effects are corroding individually and culturally. Yesterday in class (Soc 1301, a required. freshman course) a group presentation was made on "Adoption by LBG Families". Both sides of the arguments for and against were presented and one of the group presenters said that whether you believe it is right or wrong is simply a matter of personal choice. There really is no right or wrong on the issue." A member of the class added that in 10 or 15 years it will probably be accepted as normal and the issue would become mute at that point. Among arguments presented was a study showing that children raised in LBG homes were emotionally normal and expert opinion that children in these houses would suffer socially. (In other words there was conflicting professional opinion.) And it was reiterated more than once that whether you agreed with adoption by LBG families or not was relative to your own moral values and so the consensus on this issue would be made on personal beliefs. LBG couples should be allowed to choose based upon their personal values.

But look, behind all of this, and throughout the textbook for that class, a constant theme has been (on moral values and even reality), all values are relative to personal beliefs. No one person's values are more right or wrong than another's. This is the idea that I completely reject, in an absolute not relative way. It certainly is the case that judging the absolute value of something like LBG family adoption will not be clear cut because the factors involved are complex, but the basic principles for value judgment are non-complex, clear cut and unambiguous and as absolute as the law of gravity.

## The End of Moral Relativity

### What are Values and are they necessary

To begin to understand why values have an absolute basis, let's ask several questions. First, what do we mean by 'values', what exactly is it we are talking about. Second, do we need them and if so why? And then we can finally answer the question, which values are good (correct, right) and which may be bad (incorrect, wrong).

What do we mean by '(moral) values'? Here, the definition will be: a set of principles by which actions are determined to be either right or wrong. Right actions will produce a beneficial result while wrong actions may lead to undesirable consequences. Note that beneficial result does not imply an immediately pleasing result. The benefit may not be forthcoming immediately. If you are saving for a home, not buying that new dress or shirt and instead putting the money into a savings account will not have an immediate pleasing, beneficial result. But at some point in the future the benefit will be realized (hopefully) and the result will be extremely pleasing and lasting many more years than the pleasure of the dress or shirt that would have brought immediate pleasure. I think it is also important to note here that the benefit of putting a value into practice may never result in material gratification. Instead, the result may be 'spiritual' gratification. For some, they may feel the gratification of pleasing God. Or, if we begin to give up comforts we have come to expect in order to stop global warming, we will never receive any material beneficial result, only the satisfaction that we have helped prevented a world wide catastrophe. Or, if as parents we give up material comforts, that new BMW for a Toyota, in order to pay for the best education possible for our children, gaining only the spiritual reward that comes from loving our children. So to reiterate, here a value (to a person) is defined as 'a belief which someone holds and practices, the result of which is beneficial to that person materially or spiritually'.

### Are Values Necessary

Do we need values? Couldn't we just make choices and decisions on whatever comes to mind at that moment, whatever the 'situation' dictates? Couldn't we just 'play it by ear' or 'wing it'? Of course we could. This would be a 'valueless' approach to life. Why might we need values? Going back to the definition of values, remember that values are used to make choices and decisions. And here we raise the question whose answer forms the basis of the need for values and their absolute nature. Who or what can have values? Since values imply choices or decisions, what kinds of entities are capable of making choices and decisions? Only living entities can make choices or decisions. Non-living entities, inanimate objects, exist, but do not possess life. They cannot make choices or decisions, and therefore do not need values and are valueless. Living entities, on the other hand, must make choices and decisions to live. Therefore, they must have values.

All living things must have values from which to make choices and decisions that sustain their existence. For the vast majority of life, these values are contained in the form of inherited instincts particular to each species. Only humans are capable of choosing values. It is critical to understand that life implies values. That being alive carries with it the burden of staying alive. That all living beings except humans, make choices and decisions based upon their instincts which are their values. For them, the choices are automatic. So in a sense, I am saying that instincts represent

## The End of Moral Relativity

values, or more precisely a single value, the value of life. Instincts are based upon the value of life and maintaining life. For almost all species except humans, instincts automatically make the choices necessary to maintain the existence of the species.

The purpose of instincts is to preserve life. And so, the basic value from which all values flow is maintaining existence. There are two principles of existence and values:

The Principle of Existence – the state of existence of living entities implies the burden of maintaining existence.

The Principle of Values – the values of a living entity are a result of the Principle of Existence.

In living things other than mankind, instincts will act to preserve the individual and the species or possibly be neutral. But if a species has an instinct that is anti-species preserving, that species will become extinct. More commonly, the instincts of a species fail to adapt to a changing environment eventually leading to extinction of the species. The difference in humans is not that our values are relative; it is that humans have been set free from most genetic, inherited instincts by human reason. For man, this has advantages and disadvantages. However the Principle of Values holds. As living beings, humans must make choices and those choices must carry out the burden of maintaining human existence.

It is impossible that man has survived 50,000 yrs on seat of the pants values, values that were arbitrary and relative. Instead, there have been non-arbitrary, non-relative values guiding man's existence. They have been contained and transmitted in the form of religion, traditions, customs and norms, categories of Learned Evolutionary Behavior.

I have shown that the absolute, most fundamental value to Human's (and all living beings) is existence. The basic values following from this being those that sustain an individual's life. There are material and non-material values. For each human, food and shelter are two basic material values. Another fundamental material value is society. Although each human can potentially exist without society, societies will have dominance over lone individuals whose only choice is joining or dying. So society is the second fundamental value of human existence. A single human depends on his society for his existence. If the society perishes, it is almost a certainty that the individuals of that society will either perish or suffer a greatly reduced level of comfort and security.

### Human Values

Above, I said that man's reason has set him free of genetic, automatic instincts. This is not entirely true. Humans have genetic, automatic values such as the reaction of touching a hot stove and instinctively pulling away. These I will call non-volitional values. Human also have volitional values exhibited in their evolutionary behavior, three of which are generally agreed upon by evolutionary scientists: territorial, societal, learning and a fourth, religion, remains in disagreement. Territorial behavior is evidenced individually in such things as home ownership and socially as states and nations. Social evolutionary behavior manifests itself in family, society and many societal subgroups. The learning of culture can be seen in the laws, customs, traditions and religious norms passed from generation to generation.

## The End of Moral Relativity

### The Social Nature of Humans

Darwinism popularized the idea of 'survival of the fittest (although Herbert Spencer originally coined the phrase) Evolutionary scientists prefer to use 'natural selection'. Natural Selection occurs within a species through mutation and environmental response. In general if one surveys the animal kingdom, it does appear to be survival of the fittest for each individual animal. Cheetahs outrace Gazelles and make a meal of them. Killer whales prefer seals, etc. This picture is microscopic. At the macroscopic level, Gazelles as a species may outlast cheetahs, and seals outlast killer whales, giving them the last laugh. What counts in nature is not the single life, but the survival of the species.

The human species is no different in that it is not the individual that counts in the long run, it is the species. (Dawkins argues that the individual (specifically their genes) is the basic unit of evolutionary selection. But he concludes that the individual (gene) will sacrifice itself to ensure the survival of its gene pool. I believe this can be put in the broader context of the individual sacrificing itself for the survival of a society. I give the example of individuals sacrificing themselves in battle to ensure their societies survival.) The territorial instinct of humans complicates matters. Usually it is not survival of our species which concerns us, it is survival of our particular human society of which we are a member that concerns us. Every species has what Darwin termed their 'hostile forces of nature'. Those forces in the natural world with which they contend for survival. Initially, the hostile forces of nature for man were natural, predators which sought to make a meal of him, and environmental, starvation, weather, climate change, etc. As humans became numerous and completed population of the earth, man's primary hostile force of nature became other men. That is to say that human societies attacked and conquered one another and the greatest danger to survival became defeat by a competing society. Frequently, survival of the fittest society became a physical conflict, war.

Humans are a social species. As far back in prehistory as the science of Anthropology can take us, man has always lived in social groups. There was never a time when man lived alone without being in the company of his fellow men. Without his social grouping, man as a species would become extinct. Monkeys live in tribes and wolves run in packs for the same reason. None could survive alone. We cannot survive apart from the social group we belong to and which the members of, acting together, provide the necessities of life for the society and each individual member. So a society, acting as a single entity, must provide for its own defense, organize it's self and sustain not only the well being of its members, but their continued loyalty.

### The Buffer of Civilization

Hardly anyone could think that the choices in their lives on a day to day basis really had anything to do with their continued existence. What clothes we buy or wear today, what time we leave for school, what we order for lunch are hardly life or death choices. I had better look both ways before crossing the street, but other than a few such choices, my values and choices based upon them are hardly going to cause my death or the collapse of my society today or anytime in the foreseeable future. This is true only because man's social structures have provided an immense

## The End of Moral Relativity

buffering to the effect of day to day choices you, I or our society make. Essentially, we are never (there are exceptions to this) immediately confronted with what may turn out to be the long term disastrous effects of choices we make.

Man once lived in a state where most of his daily choices had immediate and obvious consequences for his continued existence. Imagine a group of human cave dwellers 20,000 years ago. (Please take my 20,000 year estimate with a grain of salt.) On any particular day the hunters would go out to find food. Leaving the cave, they must decide which way to go for today's hunt. Even before they leave the cave they must decide what weapons to take, what protection to leave behind, who should go, what clothing. Anyone of these decisions made incorrectly could potentially lead to disaster. No protection left behind and the cave might be attacked by a tiger or another tribe and everyone slaughtered. Not enough men on the hunt and there may not be enough men to capture and kill a large prey. Or turning the wrong direction may mean finding no prey. The consequences of decisions and their relevance to life and death were very immediate.

We are 20,000 yrs from that cave. Our daily choices hardly seem to matter as to our well being. Since we are so far removed from daily life and death choices, perhaps our daily choices don't make any difference, we can just 'wing it.' Before answering this, it might be best to say what it is our daily choices do affect if not our existence. As I have said, humans cannot live apart from their society or culture. So we need to look more closely at societies.

Societies have a life cycle. They are born, ascend, flourish and decline. At any point in this life cycle the path that a culture is on, and its progress on that path, is determined by the sum of the value judgments of its people. Some value judgments have a great deal more significance than others. Deciding how to vote on the issue of abortion is a great deal more significant than which movie you will attend. The ratio may be 1,000,000 to 1, but every choice one makes will have its effect on where their culture is heading, some very small effects, others immense effects.

Some choices, in fact many, are 'relatively' valueless. What we eat for lunch or how we dress for work or school. But choices such as abortion and gay marriage are significant moral decisions because they involve the value of human life and family. These choices will have significant consequences. The hoped for consequence is a society where individuals may pursue their dream of happiness without adversely affecting the happiness of others. The unforeseen, unintended consequences may be other than the desired outcome.

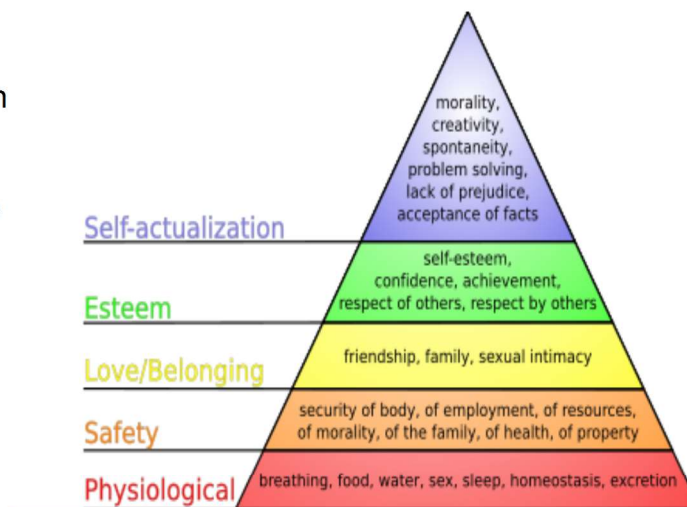
Something I noticed in my sociology class that seemed to beg identifying and questioning was an unspoken assumption that changes taking place through consensus in our free, democratic society will always result in a better society. This assumption is difficult to challenge since the complexity of our society masks and delays the real effects of significant moral choices, making them difficult to predict and later identify. Compounding the difficulty of predicting outcomes of choices is the fact that once choices have been made and the results been in effect for a significant period of time, these choices are difficult to undo, lives and livelihoods depend on continuation of status quo. Legal systems are rightly designed to make it difficult to undo the past. The point of this? Well, the point is that making changes in a society's traditional moral values is a momentous event in which we 1) cannot know for certain the right or wrong (usually), 2) may have unforeseen and unintended consequences that are undesirable and 3) will be difficult to undo.

## Individual and Social Values

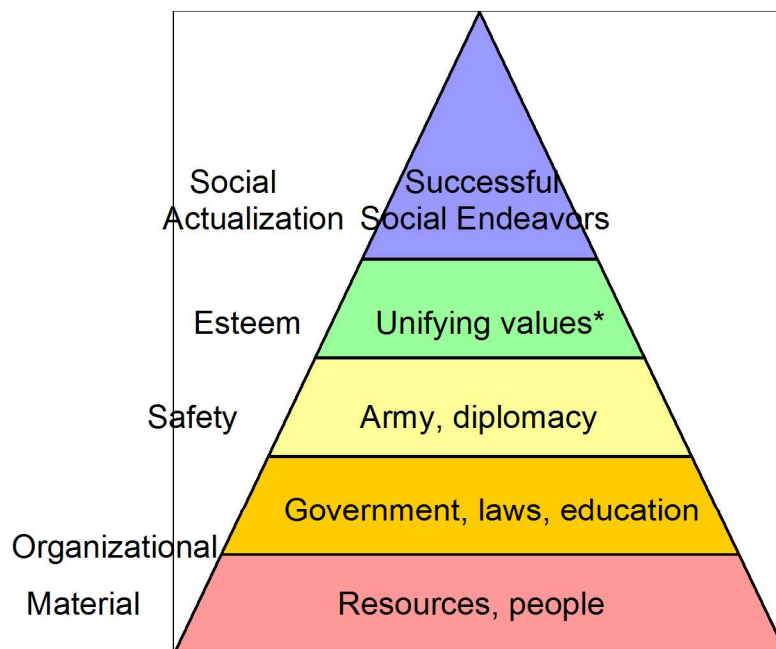
The hierarchy of values for an individual has been elegantly presented by Maslow. But what is the corresponding hierarchy of needs for a society? The question has been a central concern for Sociology from its origins in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It has been observed even in antiquity that social structure through government and laws are a basis for social existence. But do government and laws alone sustain a culture. Of course the answer is no. The laws and government of ancient Greece, Rome or Egypt did not change significantly over time. Instead, as Kenneth Clark in his BBC TV series Civilization has said, these civilizations became exhausted.

What are the causes of 'exhaustion' of a society? There are material causes, such as exhaustion of resources. And there are non-material causes. Before naming some non-material causes, we must first understand what the non-material needs of a society are. We can best approach an answer to this question by looking at the well known Hierarchy of Human Needs proposed by Abraham Maslow.

To the right is Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs. Accepting the conclusion that man and his society are indivisible, a hierarchy of human Needs requires a corresponding Hierarchy of Social Needs. Below Maslow's Hierarchy is a suggested Hierarchy of Social Needs. Looking at the Hierarchy of Human Needs, the physiological needs may be met apart from society, but even at this very basic level of individual needs, a reliable supply of food almost certainly requires a social setting. Needs above the physiological level obviously require a society for even a minimum level of fulfillment.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs



Hierarchy of Societal Needs

\* care and responsibility, fairness and equality, freedom and courage, fulfillment in life, opportunity and community, cooperation and trust, honesty and openness

## The End of Moral Relativity

The Hierarchy of Societal Needs parallels the needs of Maslow's Hierarchy. If we admit that man's goal as an individual is to achieve fulfillment of his highest needs found in the level of Self Actualization, then one of man's values must be that his society also achieves the highest level of societies needs. This value is not explicitly expressed in Maslow's Hierarchy, but it is certainly implied. Therefore, if man is to hold his society's success as a value co-equal to pursuit of his own personal values, what social values must he pursue? We will assume that the values implied by the lower three levels of the Societal Needs are obvious. Personal investment in the production of resources, respect for his fellow citizens, the laws of his society, education, patriotism, and willingness to defend his society. More abstract is the question of what are the unifying values which supply the Esteem needs of his society? Generally, the highest unifying value will be a shared abstract principle. In the US we have a shared value as expressed by the words contained in our constitution that all men are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights.

However strongly held, abstract principles do not of themselves create a social unity of cooperative behavior that permits a society to achieve it's highest societal need, Social Actualization. Lets examine what values are required of individuals that allow a society to achieve the cooperative effort required for Social Actualization. To do this, we turn to some recent theories of human evolutionary behavior concerning man's social nature.

### Social Evolutionary Behavior

A recent book, *Genetic and Cultural Evolution of Cooperation*, is based upon a series of papers delivered at the 90th Dahlem Workshop\* of 2003. It is clear from the papers contained in this book that 1) there is general agreement in the Evolutionary Sciences that man's social instincts are an evolutionary adaptation and 2) the principle, if not single, mechanism creating and sustaining social behavior is reciprocity and in successful societies it is benevolent reciprocity in particular which creates the atmosphere for success. The social norm of reciprocity is the expectation that people will respond to each other in similar ways. In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam uses the term 'Social Capital' to refer to social networks and norms of (benevolent) reciprocity and the trustworthiness that arises from them. Further, he believes that Social Capital can be measured by the amount of trust and (benevolent) 'reciprocity' in a community or between individuals. He uses the term Social Capital to describe the social investment in those networks. This reciprocity referred to by Putnam in defining Social Capital is the same reciprocity referred to constantly in the Dahlem Workshop papers. If we are to say, and I do, that the continued success of one's society is an absolute value (because one's existence depends upon it) for each member of that society, and one's own success depends on this value, and I have argued just this, then benevolent reciprocity and its resulting Social Capital are an absolute value for each member of a society in the same sense that maintaining one's own existence is an absolute value. Can this tell us anything about our own personal values?

Let me return to the question of absolute values. I have argued that man's existence and now that of his societies existence are absolute values that form the basis for all values for a person. These are absolute because they have to do with man and his society existing or perishing. Values proceeding from these absolute values will be relative to differing social conditions. The term 'absolute' is difficult to defend when applied to values other than these two so I prefer to say that these preceding values are 'sustaining' values. Within any environment in which these values

## The End of Moral Relativity

are rationally derived, there may be many 'competing' value systems expressed, whose proponents claim to be based on the two absolute values. There will certainly be disagreements on what values are correct and there will even be those who say that these value sets are all relatively correct. After all who is to say that one person's set of values reasoned from the absolute values is any better than another person's differing set of values reasoned from the same absolute values. And although it is true that two virtually opposite sets of values may be logically defended by two different groups such that each logically concluded set of values were antagonistic to one another and the logic of each seems reasonable and sound, there is an arbiter who will decide the correctness of any set of values. That arbiter is Reality. Hence we have the principle of Reality Arbitration.

Principle of Arbitration of Reality – the correctness of a moral value is determined by the response of reality to the choices made by applying that value.

However, I believe that I can state and defend one sustaining value derived from the two basic absolute values. It is already assumed that obeying a societies laws is an sustaining value for an individual. The logic of this conclusion is obvious. There is a more abstract value whose logic is not so obvious, but just as undeniable.

### Honesty – a Builder of Social Cohesion

What is Honesty? "Honesty is the value of speaking [truth](#) (being in accord with fact or reality-Webster) and creating trust in (the) minds of others. This includes all varieties of communication, both verbal and non-verbal. Honesty implies a lack of deceit. A statement can be strictly true and still be dishonest if the intention of the statement is to deceive its audience. Similarly, a falsehood can be spoken honestly if the speaker actually believes it to be true.

"Honesty is typically considered virtuous behavior, and has strong positive connotations in most situations. A principal reason for this may be that honesty simplifies communication, in that honest statements can be trusted at face value, not necessarily as true, but as genuinely believed. Additionally, honesty helps to form bonds of [trust](#) in human relationships." (Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honesty>)

Earlier I discussed recent theories of Evolutionary Behavior indicating that benevolent reciprocity and the corresponding theory of Social Capital are necessary ingredients for the cooperative behavior required of a successful society, Social Capital being the indicator of the social level of benevolent reciprocal behavior. The single most significant indicator of high Social Capital is Trust. How much trust does one feel toward his neighbors, his fellow citizens, his social environment? **The single most important ingredient of trust is Honesty. So I begin the debate of absolute and sustaining moral values by stating that Honesty is a sustaining moral value.**

So now I can address two questions raised earlier. First, what non-material conditions occurring within a society might lead to 'exhaustion' of that society? From the remarks above concerning human social behavior, it should be clear that a decrease of cooperative behavior could be a



## The End of Moral Relativity

causative factor. This would probably be followed by a decrease in acceptance and belief of those common values that were once unifying. This kind of decay of society's bonds and individual inattention to society's needs is generally accompanied by an increase of materialism and self-gratification within the general society.

The second somewhat related question is what values may be said to be absolutely bad, incorrect, and wrong. A list of these would include greed, dishonesty, self-absorption and selfishness. It is no accident that every major culture includes some form of what we know as the 'Golden Rule'.

### How Do You Know

Even though the fundamental principle of absolute values is known, determining what the correct decision is on any issue, say abortion, is not straight forward or sure. Let us say that we know the basic principle, that an action must not, including all the foreseeable future consequences, endanger the well being of our society. How do we know what will be beneficial or harmful to us and to our society? There are two important sources of knowledge that we can turn to: religion and tradition. Religion is the most important source of sustaining moral values. This can be said because religious values have stood the test of time and survived. Therefore, they are, by induction, evolutionarily successful and beneficial to the well being of a society practicing them. Religions contain a god (or gods) or central concept of existence and a moral system of codes of conduct upon which followers base choices and decisions. Religious systems do not allow discussion or voting on these codes. Usually the moral precepts are considered infallible and absolute, handed down from higher than human authority. Comparing this to genetic instincts in animals, infallibility is an excellent way to assure the unaltered transmission of behavior as genetics does with inherited instincts. Why would religions want to do this? Many would say to obtain obedience and power to a privileged few. This is one of the outcomes, but it is far more likely that infallibility and coerced following of the rules is a way of making learned values infallibly transmissible. Religion initially makes society possible by creating order and obedience and in those religions that are the most successful, morals that create this order contain as a subset those required for social stability and social cohesion.

Traditions and Law are another source of values. Traditions that have been handed down over generations have stood the test of time as valuable, they have been evolutionarily successful. What are called variously, manners, etiquette or civility are an example. These involve courtesies and conventions for interactions among societies members. We say "thank you" for good turns people have done for us; or "good morning", a greeting when encountering others. We may open doors for older people. In short, we are kind, considerate, respectful and pleasant to others. What might be the purpose or these actions? The question is answered by reference to the basis of moral values. A moral value must provide first for the continued existence of a society and its members. There is universal agreement among sociologists that a societies greatest sustaining need is cohesion and group identity. A society whose members feel a strong identity with one another, can be more cooperative and therefore exert more energy to the common needs of the society. Civility creates a more pleasant, less anxious civil environment that leads to feelings of mutual trust and cooperation.

## The End of Moral Relativity

### How Should We Act

There has been much discussion in the last three decades of the decline in the US of what has been called Civic Virtue, (need definition) those values which tend to create a more healthy, vibrant society. What do I mean by healthy and vibrant society? I mean a society in which its members feel free to collaborate with one another to achieve their own good life and where all members of the society are aware of the need to create and maintain the conditions that support this collaboration, namely, trust.

(Here summarize and refer to Putnam's work on the effect of trust on society.)

Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*, has made a compelling (at least for me) case for Social Capital as a primary measure of a society's health vis-à-vis social cohesion. I found 'Bowling Alone' to be very thought provoking. It is difficult to disagree with the conclusion that a cohesive society is a healthier society. I think one could venture even a happier society. Given that Social Capital is a significant measure of cohesiveness, and social connectedness the primary builder of Social Capital, Mr. Putnam suggests joining and volunteering as a prescription to increasing SC. I would like to suggest an expansion of this Rx based upon the conclusion that trust is the primary indicator and ingredient of Social Capital and honesty the most significant builder of trust.

As Mr. Putnam has argued, civic connectedness and cohesiveness is the primary ingredient leading to greater levels of Social Capital and therefore trust within society. And so the focus for creating healthier social conditions has been on joining and volunteering. While these are both desirable goals, on the personal level it leaves most people with the dilemma of what should I join? And, how can I find time to volunteer? Besides that, since all citizens should have the chance to make their society a better place to live, the very people who many would be volunteering to help, are the recipients of the volunteering and lead lives whose entire energies are dedicated to daily survival. What is needed, in addition to joining and volunteering, are personal goals that can be carried out immediately and without external resources.

How should we act can be answered by proposing two levels of action. The first level is what has already been proposed, namely join and volunteer. This I would call the social level. There is a second level I would call the personal level. The personal level requires neither joining or volunteering, but rather focuses on how we interact with others. On this level individuals commit to the behaviors of honesty, openness and kindness to family, friends, neighbors and even strangers. These are actions every individual can put into practice immediately. Begin initially with family and friends, but of course practice it everywhere. If this were put into practice, levels of societal trust would begin to increase immediately and joining and volunteering activities would soon follow.

## The End of Moral Relativity

\* Dahlem Konferenzen, <http://www.fu-berlin.de/veranstaltungen/dahlemkonferenzen/en/index.html>

### Bibliography

Richard Alexander, Professor Emeritus, University of Michigan, 'The Challenge of Human Social Behavior', *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*, 2006

Interview with Leda Cosmides, Oct. 28, 2001,  
<http://www.psych.ucsb.edu/research/cep/ledainterview.htm>

Smith, Kenny; Kalish, Michael; Griffiths, Thomas; Lewandowsky, Stephan; 'Introduction. Cultural transmission and the evolution of human behavior', *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B*, Sept 2008

Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, University of California Press, September 2007

Cartwright, John *Evolution and Human Behavior*, MIT Press, July 2000

Putnam, Robert, *Bowling Alone*, Simon and Schuster, 2000

Diamond, Jared, *Collapse*, Penguin Books, 2005

Glyn-Jones, Anne,  *Holding Up a Mirror*, Imprint Academic, 1996

Macionis, John, *Sociology*, Pearson, 2006

### Spiritualism and Materialism

Moral Relativity has existed at least as far back as Greek philosophical thinking around 400 BCE. It occurs when a society puts material values ahead of spiritual values. Spiritual here does not necessarily mean religious, supernatural or otherworldly. Most people would say that the spiritual world of religion is the opposite of the material world. Material, as used here, means anything that can be experienced by the senses, a real existing thing. So anything that cannot be directly sensed and or measured would be spiritual. Some examples of things that cannot be experienced directly by the senses are concepts such as Truth, Honesty, and Courage.

We often hear the words 'Human Spirit' used to refer to things that are not supernatural. When someone dreams of doing the impossible and then does it. Such things as climbing Mt. Everest or going to the moon are often referred to as examples of the 'indomitable human

## The End of Moral Relativity

spirit'. All of us touch the spiritual within us when we experience the wonder of a beautiful sunset, the awe of experiencing a sudden, powerful storm, a wind tossed ocean, the stars on a clear night.

Spirituality comes in two kinds, individual and social. Our feelings brought on by a beautiful sunset are individual (however if we are with someone at the time we will probably feel a sharing of that spirituality). Spirituality can be collective. When we landed on the moon, much of humanity shared in the spirit of accomplishing the impossible. For me, the birth of my son was an extremely spiritual event that I shared with his mother.

The opposite of materialism is non-materialism, as in not coveting material objects. The decline of religion and proclaimed 'death of God' has left a gaping hole in the human psyche which materialism has attempted to fill. "If life on earth is all we get, shouldn't we fill it with as much pleasure as possible?" Well, if this is the only life we get, no matter how much material pleasure you fill it with, when you go, the pleasure is gone, poof. What about immortality through fame? After you are gone it doesn't matter how many times your name is repeated or your picture viewed, or your book read, your gone, poof, But there is a sense of immortality in several other things. First, the human species goes on. If you had children, your spirit is living on as a part of them. If you have touched other lives, been a good husband, friend, exemplified the human spirit to others, your spirit will be part of their lives

Materialism is outside of us, non-materialism (our spiritual nature) is inside of us. The spiritual inside of us is what is not-material inside of us. Bones, blood vessels, etc are the material inside of us. Wonder, love, happiness are examples of the spiritual inside of us. So to become non-material, to reject materialism, does not mean to throw away your TV, phone, ipod, etc. It means to value your inside spiritual self more than material things. I have to bring this back to society whose existence is the most fundamental. To become a non-material society we must celebrate the spiritual nature of society

What is the spiritual nature of society? Evidence of it can be seen in the concept of social capital. This is a measure of social connectedness within a society. One might say it is a measure of how we are communing with one another. Another example of social spirituality would be our level of compassion for one another. Or the consideration we have for one another. It is not something the government can do for us. We must experience these things on a personal level.

As a society, we may share a spiritual experience in an accomplishment of our society. Our landing on the moon was an example of this. We all shared a sense of pride and wonder at having accomplished this mission. Or we may share a sorrowful spiritual experience such as 9/11. All Americans were united in their sorrow and outrage over this disaster. When natural disaster strikes and we come to the aid of one another. When our Olympic team wins gold. The winning of WWII was as intense positive social spiritual experience as Viet Nam was an intense negative spiritual experience.

Shared religious spiritual experience is extremely important. In countries with common religious beliefs, Social Capital is high.

## The End of Moral Relativity



This document was created with the Win2PDF "print to PDF" printer available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>

This version of Win2PDF 10 is for evaluation and non-commercial use only.

This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.

<http://www.win2pdf.com/purchase/>