Ghost Busters in Anthropology

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Frederick Nietzsche is not an acknowledged founding father of cultural anthropology, yet far more than is realized, his way of thinking propagated and took over in modern anthropology. Sometime in the 1880's Nietzsche thought he had the answer to the central question I shall address, which concerns the experience of felt obligation.

That central question is this: how are we to represent the directive content of a culture and how are we to explain and/or justify its directive or motivational force? That is, what are the directives of a culture and why in the world do people feel bound or compelled to obey their commands?

Nietzsche’s answer to the question is given in one of his famous aphorisms: "being moral means being highly accessible to fear." Most contemporary anthropologists seem to think he was right, at least in one crucial respect.

Nietzsche's aphorism neatly and radically divides our central question into two isolated or independent parts. On the one hand there is the question: how are we to represent the directive content of a culture? That directive content, the "moral" order, includes, for Nietzsche, not only the specific obligations of a tradition - bury the dead - but also the various demand generating principles - God, sin, justice, rights, duty - that support them. On the other hand there is the question: how are we to explain and/or justify its directive or motivational force. It should be noted that Nietzsche explains rather than justifies the directive force of culture; for he believes there is no justification for a fear-driven feeling of boundedness to the received injunctions of one's tradition.

It is that radical division of explanatory labor that has appealed to so many contemporary anthropologists and social theorists. Indeed, the very first step in most analyses of society as a moral order is to partition the "content" and "force" aspects of obligation into separate boxes.

In one box, sometimes labeled "culture," get put the doctrines, symbols, discourse, maxims, and "information" definitive of the injunctions of a tradition - eat with a fork not with your hands, do not make love to your sister, widows may not remarry, all "swarming things" are prohibited food, except crickets and grasshoppers, etc.

In a second box, sometimes labeled "personality," get put the motives, desires, needs and "energy" which explains feelings of commitment to those injunctions. The idioms used for describing those feelings of commitment may vary across cultures, yet an experiential core is recognizable: the feeling of being under the command of God or bound by some force greater than the self; the experience of guilt or dread or loss of sanctity; the experience of a compulsion or constraint superior to the ego; Freud's super-ego, Durkheim's collective conscious, Kant's categorical imperative.

Not everyone agrees with Nietzsche that it is fear per se that explains the force behind the directive content of culture. Some argue that the force has its source in a universal desire to produce agreeable feelings in high status members of your in-group, or that it is a by-product of the resolution of the Oedipus conflict. Many other external
"energy" sources have been proposed to account for the directive force that gets attached to the directive content of a cultural tradition.

Not everyone labels the two boxes in the same way. Some have two boxes with names like "primary" (cultural institutions) and "secondary" (cultural institutions) on them. Others have boxes with names like "ideology" and "disguised interests" on them. Whatever the names on the boxes, however, most social theorists follow Nietzsche in having two of them, and in having the directive force of culture as something external to, or outside of, or a supplement to, the directive content of culture. The directive force of culture, according to that widespread view, is not something that can be accounted for simply by reference to the directive content of a tradition. Information, it is argued, cannot supply its own energy.

D'Andrade (1981:192-193) makes a very similar observation about theories in anthropology when he notes that "many social scientists break cultural representations into two components - 'affective' and 'ideational'..." D'Andrade views the analytic distinction as abnormal, abnormal in the sense that the ordinary language expressions of a culture seem quite able to fuse together and to simultaneously represent within a unitary description (such as "John is a crook"), a proposition about the state of the "external" world ("Joe took funds in a manner that could be prosecuted by law") and a proposition about our "internal" reactions to it ("this has made me angry and I want him punished"). The great challenge for culture theory, as I see it, is to find a way to defend and justify this common place ordinary language practice of merging or conflating things that so many analysts have felt compelled, by their theory of culture, to separate.

That challenge is to develop a theory of culture and human motivation in which the directive force of culture can be understood in terms of its directive content. This will require a major break with received wisdom, and success is by no means guaranteed. For it is by no means obvious that the "external" world of nature, independent of human involvement with it and reactions to it, contains something called a "crook;" and if it is merely a factual description of the world that "Joe took some funds in a manner which could be prosecuted by law" then that is all it is, a factual description with no "logical" or "rational" force to impel the reaction "I am angry and want him punished."

Indeed, it is precisely because the ordinary language expression "Joe is a crook" does lend itself to analysis into separate components, the "ideational" and the "affective", that once those components have been separated out and laid bare, the hard work begins: to justify fusing them back together by showing how the force of the reaction (anger) "logically" or "rationally" follows from the description of the act. The goal is to fuse, through a theory of culture, the directive force of culture to its directive content, without the assistance of a supplementary irrational or extra-rational or extrinsic energy source. That is not going to be easy and the stakes are high.

Historically the radical separation of the directive content of culture from its directive force has been justified by an appeal to two very powerful arguments. To overturn those arguments would be tantamount to a revolutionary (or perhaps, counter-revolutionary, that is, pre-modern) rethinking of the relationship between culture and nature, subjectivity and objectivity.

The first argument is Nietzsche's null-reference ("God is dead") argument. One, very terse version goes like this: from the point of view of a "scientific" description of the directly observable world, i.e. the "things" (God, sin, or "natural" rights, etc.) with respect to which most people feel bound, do not objectively exist. Thus, since there are no such things as Gods, sin or "natural" rights (etc.), the experience of their directive force (for example, guilt following transgression) is irrational and illusory, and must have its source in something other than a rational respect for objective reality itself.
Nietzsche's null-reference argument can be more fully explicated by considering his answer to one of anthropology's most provocative questions, the "witch" question: cross-culturally and historically, why have so many accused witches been positively convinced of their own guilt? One conceivable answer to that question is this: because they were witches. I happen to think of their own guilt? have to explanation for themselves, the modern ways Nietzsche goes be true. Says Nietzsche: "Although the most acute judges of the witches, and even the witches themselves, were convinced of the guilt of witchery, the guilt nevertheless was nonexistent." He goes on to say, shockingly, "It is thus with all guilt."

Nietzsche gives a null-reference answer to the witch question. Then he generalizes the null-reference argument to each and every case where the following two conditions hold: 1 - a supposed objective-external yet invisible entity is invoked (e.g., God, witches, natural rights); 2 - with respect to that unseen thing the self is supposed to be subordinate, bound or guilty.

As you can see Nietzsche not only suspected that God was dead. Under the influence of an empiricist or positivist philosophy of science, with which he flirted at various times in his career, Nietzsche had doubts about the objective existence of all unseen things, including God, witches, souls, sin, necessity, rights, values and moral obligations.

Positivism is empiricism in its purest form. Its central doctrine is that only seeing is believing, while any other claim to knowledge is either tautology or metaphysical nonsense; according to the positivists only the senses can get you to reality. In his work, Human, All Too Human, Nietzsche put it this way:

And what magnificent instruments of observation we possess in our senses...Today we possess science precisely to the extent to which we have decided to accept the testimony of the senses — to the through. The rest is miscarriage and not-yet-science - in other words, metaphysics, theology, psychology, epistemology - or formal science, a doctrine of signs such as logic and that applied logic which is called mathematics. In them reality is not encountered at all, not even as a problem...

That is the same Nietzsche, who moved by a positivistic impulse described Asia as a "dreamy" place where they still do "not know how to distinguish between truth and poetry." The gist of a null-reference argument goes like this: when it comes to God, sin, morality, obligation, necessity and witchery there is nothing real "out there" in the nature of things to be guilty of, or to be bound by. Thus, there is no objective basis for the experience of being commanded by God; or for a feeling of sin; or for a pang of conscience; or for a perception of inevitability and necessity; or for the conviction that one is a witch; or for the directive "force" of culture. Such experiences, feelings, pangs, perceptions, convictions and compulsions tell us nothing about the external world but much about phantoms that haunt the human mind.

Nietzsche reasons on. Moral obligations are phantoms, not objective facts out there waiting to be discovered through positive inquiry. Belief in the God-phantom, sin-phantom, conscience-phantom, and witch-phantom is little more than slavish susceptibility to custom, suggestion, indoctrination, conformity, reward or social pressure - extrinsic compulsions which explain our subordination to the directives of our culture. We certainly do not feel bound by our obligations because they are true, for there is nothing out there for them to be true of.
God has long been dead for contemporary anthropologists. The major measure of his fate is that almost all theory in contemporary anthropology designed to explain the origin and function of other peoples' ideas (e.g., sin, ancestral spirit attack) and practices (fasting, pilgrimage, confession, self-flagellation) is made possible by a Nietzschean null-reference assumption. Nietzsche's answer to the "witch question" (they do not exist) has become the "conventional" wisdom. This is quite ironic since it was Nietzsche who advised: part from your cause as soon as it triumphs; hold suspect all "received wisdom" and cross-examine it as a prejudice from the past.

Despite Nietzsche's admonition, his null-reference reasoning has become the conventional form of reasoning in anthropology. Prominent theorists of culture who are in dispute about almost everything else share with each other the Nietzschean assumption that tradition-based beliefs are phantoms of mind. In general, so-called "super"-natural entities, feelings of moral obligation (the directive force of culture) and society itself are presumed to have standing only as internal mental representations or as a collective subjectivity projected into, or reified as a symbolic form. Out of anthropological theory comes the resounding judgment that the native has confused his or her own mental constructs with external reality, and that the world in which he or she lives is a kind of fantasy or delusion or false consciousness.

Murdock (1980:89), with characteristic directedness, gives clear expression to this anthropological judgment, although cognate formulations could be cited from theorists as diverse as Schneider, Spiro, and Foucault (indeed, we are prone to the fashion). Thus, while reflecting upon the category of "sin" among the Semang (the Semang seem to believe it is a sin to comb your hair during a thunderstorm, or to tell a joke to your mother-in-law), Murdock asserts that the ethical doctrines of other peoples are often arbitrary and devoid of objective justification. Nietzsche-like he argues that, among the Semang, feelings of obligation have their origin in fear of the sanctioning power of a phantom called God - a learning process by which one phantom (God) begets another phantom (sin).

Most contemporary anthropologists are modern, without assuming much responsibility for it. Being modern they are Nietzschean individualists, and being Nietzschean individualists and anthropologists they spend their time analyzing other peoples' ideas about reality, constraint and obligation as though "reality", "constraint", and "obligation" ought to be put in quotation marks. They view a culture's view of "things" and "obligations" as meanings imposed or projected by human beings onto an inchoate world, imposed meanings first dignified by each generation as so-called "objective knowledge" about the world and then passed off as "received wisdom" one generation to the next. Under the influence of Nietzschean null-reference reasoning (all those things people bow down before do not exist) a central problematic for anthropological theory is the problem of how to explain the purported fact that so many phantom-like, delusionary or arbitrary ideas have gotten themselves lodged and stuck inside people's heads.

Accordingly, under the influence of Nietzschean assumptions, culture theorists seem to sort themselves out into two major Nietzsche roles: the "ghost busters" and the "psyche-analysts." The "ghost busters" engage in the revelatory unmasking of other peoples' pious beliefs about reality and obligation, dramatically exposed by the anthropologist as phantom culture. The goal is to promote free individualism (rebellion and liberation) through the criticism of cultural beliefs and social practices. Numerous phantoms (in addition to God, sin, and witches) have been added to the Nietzschean list of things that do not exist, except in the self-deceiving mind of its beholder: childhood, kinship, authority, sacredness, even ethnographic writing itself, writing itself — all now listed as figments of a compliant imagination held hostage to the sway of tradition.
Then there are the "psyche-analysts." The "psyche-analysts" try to understand the origin and function of all those notorious ideas about reality and obligation that seem to haunt the human mind. The "psyche-analysts" try to develop a positive science, or at least an interpretive discipline, for the study of other-than-rational and less-than-rational processes to help account for the perplexing world-wide distribution of (what appears to them) as a slavish susceptibility to custom and tradition. Thus, when it comes to explaining the origin and function of the directive force behind cultural obligations - that feeling of being under the command of something greater than the self - the literature on conscience and superego formation is rich in postulated irrational processes. Some theorists point to fear, others point to hostility meant for the father directed against one's self, still others to defensive identification, and so on.

Whichever the anthropologist's preferred calling - ghost buster or psyche analyst - we end up with those two neatly separated analytic boxes. On the one hand, there is the "directive content" of a culture, which makes claims to authority over the mind of the native by reference to things that, according to Nietzscheans, do not exist. On the other hand, there is the "directive force" behind culture, which is real enough as a force in experience, but which, according to the "ghost busters" and "psyche-analysts," certainly can not derive its force, as that force is experienced, from things that are unreal. And, of course they are right, if those things are unreal.

So, why have so many accused witches been positively convinced of their own guilt? "Because they were witches" is something like the kind of answer that will have to be defended if the directive force of culture (e.g., feeling guilty and confessing to witchcraft) is to be derived from its directive content (e.g., witchcraft exists, and it is evil and should not be practiced). That kind of answer will not be easy to defend, of course. Yet speaking on behalf of the defense it seems to me it is a noble challenge -- to restore realism and reference to cultural concepts; to show how cultural meanings can work to illuminate aspects of reality, rather than to fantasize or hallucinate or mystify them.

The second argument standing as a hurdle before a rationalist or realist view of the directive force of culture is the so-called "naturalistic fallacy", the argument that it is logically impossible to derive a moral or directive conclusion from a premise consisting merely of a factual description of the objective world. Thus, for example, in the orthodox Hindu community where I do research on moral argumentation (Shweder and Miller, 1985; Shweder, Mahapatra and Miller, 1987; Shweder and Much, 1987) the apparently factual premise "she is a widow" is often used to support an evaluative or directive conclusion to the effect "it is bad, wrong, improper and inadvisable for her to eat fish, meat, garlic, onions, and all other foods classified as 'hot' foods, and she should be stopped from doing it." According to the "naturalistic fallacy" argument, since nothing about the object world

per se (e.g., the fact that such and such a person is dead) lends logical support to any particular normative conclusion, the subjective feeling that the facts impel you to do this and to not do that is, once again, illusory and irrational, and must have its source in something other than a rational respect for reality.

Notice, quite crucially, the concept of reality presupposed by the argument: reality consists solely of observable events or directly measurable states of the world as they exist independently of human involvement with them or reactions to them. As the argument goes there is nothing you can observe about exterior states of the object world that logically impels you to one type of evaluative attitude (this is right and good) versus some other (this is wrong and bad).
The main point of the "naturalistic fallacy argument", if I understand it, reduces to a very simple and undefeatable truism: if the exterior, object world is described in a value free way, then those descriptions carry no implications for values.

A major implication of the argument is that the logical gap can not be crossed between the objective world of events and objects and the subjective world of evaluative attitudes to them. The only way across the logical gap between statements of fact (the female next door whose husband died last year just ate some fish) and assertions of evaluative attitude (I want to banish her from the community) is through the brute force of some irrational or extra-rational projection. In ordinary language and folk culture, of course, the gap is crossed all the time. But, according to those who prefer to keep things in two boxes, ordinary language and folk culture do it by brute force. That is why (so the argument goes) we have a vast literature on conformity, rich in postulated irrational or extra-rational processes for explaining obedience to traditional obligations or obedience to the so-called mystifications built into the conventions of ordinary language. There is fear of disapproval, and dread of sanctions, and imitation and modeling, and so forth.

Those two arguments (the Nietzschian null-reference argument and the naturalistic fallacy argument) are formidable obstacles to any attempt to link through rational processes or reality testing the directive content of culture to its directive force. The two arguments, if accepted without revision, virtually guarantee that the directive content of culture, the things "out there" to which cultural notions refer, cannot explain its directive force, and that something else (an irrational or extra-rational energy source) must be added to do that explanatory work. Let me reiterate by means of an example from Orissa, India.

Orthodox Hindu Brahman men tell me they must never address their father by his first name, because their father is a "moving God" and that they are his "devotee". Orthodox Hindu Brahman women tell me that they must never ask their husband to massage their legs, because their husband is a "moving God" and they are his "devotee".

The problem I face as an ethnographer trying to understand and make sense of those assertions is the following: if Gods do not exist, and if your father or your husband is not a God, and if the description "he is my father" or "he is my husband" logically or rationally implies nothing about your evaluative attitude towards him or how he ought to be treated or behave (as a God), then whatever you feel impelled to do (address him with a term of respect; keep your distance) or not do (address him with a first name; ask for a massage) must have its origins in an extra-logical or illogical source - such as fear, indoctrination, cultural conditioning, conformity, etc.

Now try to imagine for a moment that Gods exist, and that fathers and husbands are Gods. Imagine that somewhere within your conception of what the world is like (he is a moving God; I am his devotee) there is contained the idea of the proper ends or levels of excellence, the telos, that things in the world might realize if, through cultivation and enlightenment, those things were to realize their potential.

If you can imagine those things then you can see that in that world there would be no difficulty establishing an "internal" (one box) connection between the directive content of culture and its directive force. In such a world the state-of-the-world description "as a son I am the devotee of my father, the moving God" would illuminate some aspect of reality. The idea of "reality" would include, or contain within itself, the proper end or level of excellence that a thing might obtain. The "good" devotee as well as the "worthless" devotee would be objective facts of the world; and the really real world would consist of the level of fulfillment that things might obtain when functioning at maximum potential.
What I am presenting here is, of course, a skeletal version of the ancient teleological vision of reality. In such a teleological world, nature itself is perceived to be striving for, or at least capable of, the attainment of some natural state of genuine excellence (the "good" for that thing). A major theoretical advantage of a teleological view of reality is that the idea of the "good" is contained within the idea of reality; thus the feeling that one is obliged or bound to do this or that can, in a straightforward way, be derived from that one, pervasive, characteristically human motive that sometimes goes by the name "the reality principle". That motive simply states: have a decent level of respect for the objective constraints of reality, be in touch with what is real, strive to eliminate error and contradiction from your thinking.

I have described one way to derive the directive force of culture from the directive content, without having to appeal to any motive other than the reality principle. That way is to adopt the ancient and very widespread teleological view of reality, where contained within the objective world is the idea of the "good" and the standards of maturity or excellence that objects can achieve. I recognize (with some regret) that the proposal is probably too much to stomach for modern sensibilities. But, even if that is the case, take comfort, for there is an alternative way to derive the directive force of culture from the directive content, without having to appeal to supplementary motives other than the reality principle.

That alternative is to stop trying to represent the world independent of the human experience of it and human involvement with it. While it remains a debatable and open issue whether this is an advisable strategy for comprehending the non-artifactual physical world, there is much to recommend it for the comprehension of social reality and the directive force of culture.

The basic idea, which I take to be D'Andrade's central point, is that social reality is built up out of concepts and terms (so-called intentional concepts) that already contain within their semantic meaning propositions about our needs, concerns, motives, and desires and the way we respond to the world.

Our "natural" language supplies us with many examples of concepts whose very meaning depend on reference to our needs, desires, purposes and responses to the world: functional concepts and terms (for example, for tools, body parts, and quite crucially, social roles), concepts and terms for so-called "institutional facts" (for example, promising), and concepts and terms for objects of art or artifice (e.g., "a weed").

What, for example, is a "weed"? A "weed", one might propose, is an intrusive plant you do not want growing in your garden; hence a rose in your vegetable patch might be plucked out as a weed. There is no third person, "scientific", botanical, independent-of-human-response, anatomical, genetic or chemical definition of plants that can specify which objects count as "weeds." "Weeds" are not (so-called) "natural kinds", yet weeds are as real as raindrops, even though we, and our responses to them, are directly implicated in their existence.

And what is a "chair"? It is something a person can sit on. And what is a "mother"? Certainly what a mother is for, for us, is part of its meaning; and if you have the chance to be a mother you are not a good one unless you recognize your obligation to strive to live up to the standard of excellence defined by her social function.

When it comes to intentional concepts the force of the concept is "internal" to its content. The content has already taken account of our needs, desires, motives, and purposes. Thus it is not a violation of the naturalistic fallacy to say "She is his mother; therefore she ought to care about her child's strep infection."
It is not a violation of the naturalistic fallacy because the factual promise ("She is his mother") is not a description of the world independent of our involvement with it. The factual premise already contains within its proper meaning our beliefs about the importance of the obligations associated with protection and nurturing of the vulnerable. The evaluative and directive conclusion ("Therefore she ought to care about his strep infection") simply draws out the logical implications of a factual description of a world built up out of intentional concepts, concepts that are designated "intentional" precisely because they portray a world indissociable from our desires towards it, reactions to it, and beliefs about it.

Here is another example of the way factual descriptions are used with directive force in a real world built up out of intentional concepts. The example comes from Shweder and Much (1986), and it consists of a brief verbal exchange between a teacher (Mrs. Swift) and a four year old child (Alice) in an American pre-school classroom. Alice is seated at a table. She has a glass full of water. Mrs. Swift (the teacher) approaches and addresses Alice. The verbal exchange contains three utterances:

1. Mrs. Swift: That is not a paper cup.
2. Alice: I want to put it down (broken, whimpering voice).
3. Mrs. Swift (taking the glass away from Alice): No, that's just for snack time when the teacher is at the table.

Now one can imagine a two boxed approach to the analysis of this episode, where one tries hard to keep analytically distinct the directive content of the episode from its directive force. The teacher, a powerful and high status member of the child's social world imposes upon the child an arbitrary and convention-based directive (children must use paper cups and not glasses, except at snack time with the teacher's supervision), which bears no logical or rational relationship to the factual descriptive premise "That is not a paper cup" (which from a factual descriptive point of view is true of almost every object in the classroom!). The logical or rational gap between the factual premise ("that is not a paper cup") and the directive conclusion (put it down!) is bridged by the brute force of the teacher's "weight" as an object of fear or identification, or what have you, and the child whimpering with anxiety is motivated by "extrinsic" forces to associate the commanded evaluative attitude (avoidance) with the factual object (the glass).

An alternative, one boxed analysis, in which there is no logical or rational gap between the factual premise and the directive conclusion, might look something like this. The terms and concepts we use to describe the world take account of our needs and desires. Thus the state-of-the-world description "That is not a paper cup", used in that context (an adult approaching a four year old who is holding in her hand a drinking vessel made of glass), already contains within itself the directive conclusion "Put it down!" The factual premise "That is not a paper cup" is a category contrast, meaning "That is not a paper cup, it is a glass." It refers the meaning of the event to what is assumed to be known about the relevant differences between paper cups and glasses (a potential for harm through breakage), focusing the meaning of the event on the issue of harm, and thus encoding within the factual premise the issue of potential harm and the human motivation of harm avoidance. Although the teacher never explicitly mentions the issue of harm, the child seems to understand it, as she shows by her offer to "put it [the glass] down" (so that she would be less likely to break it?).

The teacher's utterance ("that is not a paper cup") leaves a lot unsaid. Indeed, no one has actually stated that paper cups are different from glasses because glasses break, or that glasses are dangerous when broken, or that young children (you Alice) are insufficiently competent or conscientious to be trusted with the unsupervised use of fragile and potentially harmful materials. Nor has anyone mentioned the directive proposition
lurking behind all this: that teachers (adults?) should take responsibility for protecting young children from classroom activities in which they are at risk of injuring themselves. All that factual and directive content remains implicit in what was said, yet all of it is necessary for an understanding of what was said. Anyone who understood what was said would have no difficulty understanding why the teacher was highly motivated to get Alice to use a paper cup instead of a glass, and why Alice, if she understood what was said, might be motivated by the force of reason and the reality principle to do what the teacher implicitly directed her to do: put it down!

Please note that I am not saying that the "weight" of the teacher's authority position (she is the highest status member of the local ingroup, and it is her classroom) added nothing to the force of her directive. It may well have gotten the child to attend to the message or to treat it as an important communication. But I would argue that the main force of the message comes from the "inner" logic of its directive content, which is already so sufficiently well adapted to the needs and desires of the child that it may appeal to her reason. The teacher's "weight" is merely status in the service of reality testing; and as long as hierarchy and power are used in defense of truth, beauty, and goodness why should anyone complain?

Note

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