

Conference on Behavioral Ethics: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives Harvard University October 2016

A few remarks from abroad

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1.

The conference focused on moral values and human behavior. However, the history preceding to mankind seems also to be relevant. Frans de Waal and other ethologists have demonstrated the last twenty years that the capability of moral behavior has developed in many species, including primates and other animals living in communities. These animals are inclined to care for each other and reconciliation after a violent conflict is not unusual. The strength of these inclinations depends mainly on the quality of the relation between individuals. These insights are relevant for humans as they underline that moral feelings within the group may differ depending on the attitude of specific individuals. So moral capability may not be restricted to mankind, although it has to be cultivated in order to develop completely.

2.

For a very long time in human history the cultivation of moral capabilities was the job of people living together in bands of hunters and gatherers. This may explain why our moral gut-feelings, as Joshua Greene has argued, are primarily related to our tribe. However, what is to be considered as a tribe? Since the beginnings of agriculture communities have expanded enormously and humans are able to identify with several communities of different size. So today's tribes can be defined at a local, ethnic, religious, linguistic, national and even at a global level. As a result the definition of strangers may be different from case to case. This was illustrated at the conference by the talk given by Michael Norton who showed us a graph demonstrating large differences between Boston, Copenhagen and St Gallen on the one hand and Istanbul, Ryadh and Athens on the other (see figure 1). Citizens from the three first named cities were ready to cooperate with strangers whereas citizens of the last three cities did not or to a lesser degree. This is in line with the findings of our own research as we discovered important differences between modern societies in Northwestern Europe and societies where social life is more traditional as in the Southeastern parts of Europe. In these societies the circle of your own tribe is narrower than in societies where mobility and trade have been developed to a high degree. It seems to be inevitable that this will influence the way certain tensions between Us and Them are handled.

3.

Nevertheless these tensions will occur, also in modern societies. Looking for the best way to handle them, Greene has developed his philosophy of 'deep pragmatism'. We can agree with his view that we have to study the actual consequences of human behavior and that relying our intuitions without reflection can be dangerous. To a certain degree philosophical analysis and argument can help indeed. However, we learn from history that human reason is not

always as powerful as philosophers may hope. In fact both hostility and peace between tribes is much more related to our imagination and affections. It was not by accident that Adam Smith wrote about moral sentiments. We accepted his idea that moral imagination is more important in daily life than philosophical analysis – be it from a utilitarian perspective or not. We take this quite literally as we have analyzed a number of popular films and television-series in order to understand how empathy and compassion are imagined for the large public. Furthermore, we suppose that not only the consequences but also the intentions of human behavior haven't to be taken seriously. We are inclined to make a difference between bad events occurring by accident and events following from bad intentions of other people. Events of the last sort are considered to be morally wrong, those of the first sort to a lesser degree.

4.

These lines of thought bring us to the conclusion that approaching our moral problems from a psychological perspective alone is a bit one-sided. A kind of historical sociology seems to be necessary in order to bridge the gap between some very old mechanisms in the human mind resulting from our distant past on the one hand and moral problems in the present world on the other. At this point we were surprised that nobody in the conference referred to the many studies on the development of axial civilizations that have been published in the last decades. The enormous task to overcome egotistic behavior of groups and to bridge hostilities between different tribes has been on the agenda of the main religious and moral traditions in Europe and Asia for more than two thousand years now. They may have failed in many respects but it seems to be a bit naïve to believe that the cultivation of moral capabilities has just started in the Eighteenth Century of our history. Christian tradition, for instance, has always tried to overcome the dangers and restrictions of tribal solidarity. And not without success as we could see in a slide shown at the conference stressing the difference between Buddhists and Christian Americans in relation to the famous trolley dilemma (see figure 2). Whereas a majority of the Buddhist respondents didn't seem to have a problem with sacrificing a single human being to rescue other men, the majority of Christian Americans refused. This would be surprising if moral considerations were based on psychological processes alone. In fact the slide seems to demonstrate that both historical and sociological differences are playing a role.

5.

One of the historical processes having a huge influence on moral behavior is the expansion of our capitalist society. For a long time already the relations between market and morality have been the subject of philosophical debates. Starting with the Nineteenth century many authors became convinced that producing and trading on a large scale will lead to the erosion of morality. However, the opposite view has been defended too. In our research we conclude that the relations between market and morality are ambivalent and that, in spite of many scandals affecting the financial sector today, moral erosion cannot be seen as the inevitable outcome of a capitalist society. This seems to be supported by Michael Norton and other speakers at the conference. Take for instance his slides showing a big distance between the ideal distribution of wealth or life expectancy on the one hand and the actual distribution on the other (see figure 3-4). If it is true that moral ideals are threatened or destroyed by market societies, these results would be impossible. In fact America has always developed huge inequalities and still the moral ideal of human equality is able to survive. How then is the relation between social mobility or market economy and moral behavior to be understood? Although we don't have

the answer yet, we may think of the possibility that social mobility and moral values are two sides of the same coin. This matches with the observation made above that peaceful attitudes toward strangers are predominant in contexts characterized by a high degree of mobility.

Figure 1
Cooperation with strangers in six cities

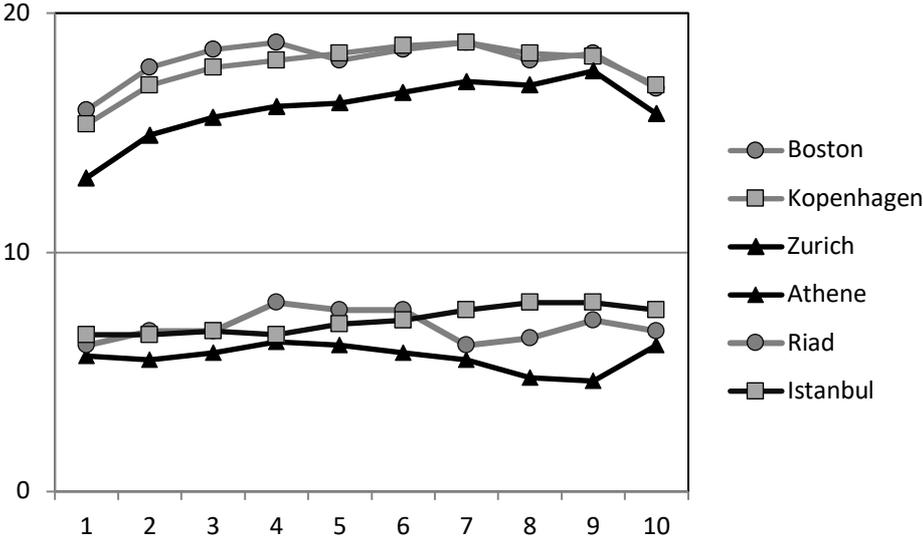


Figure 2
Approving the dead of one man in order to rescue many people.

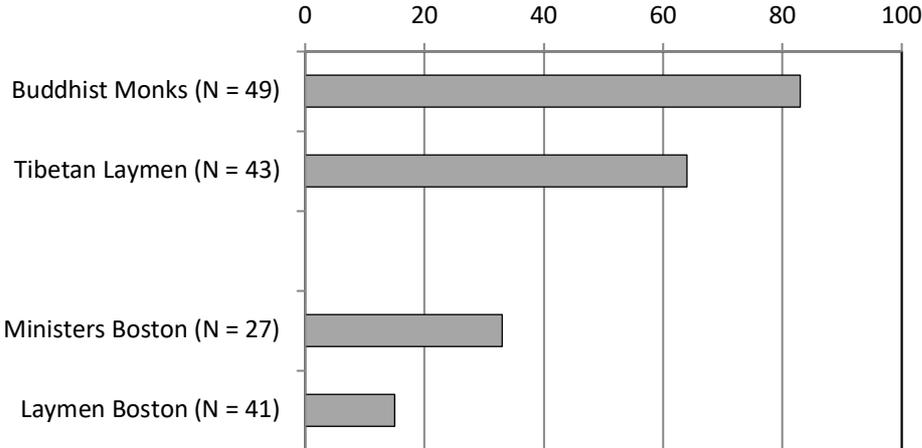


Figure 3
 Percentage of wealth owned divided per quintiles:
 the ideal, the estimated ad the actual situation

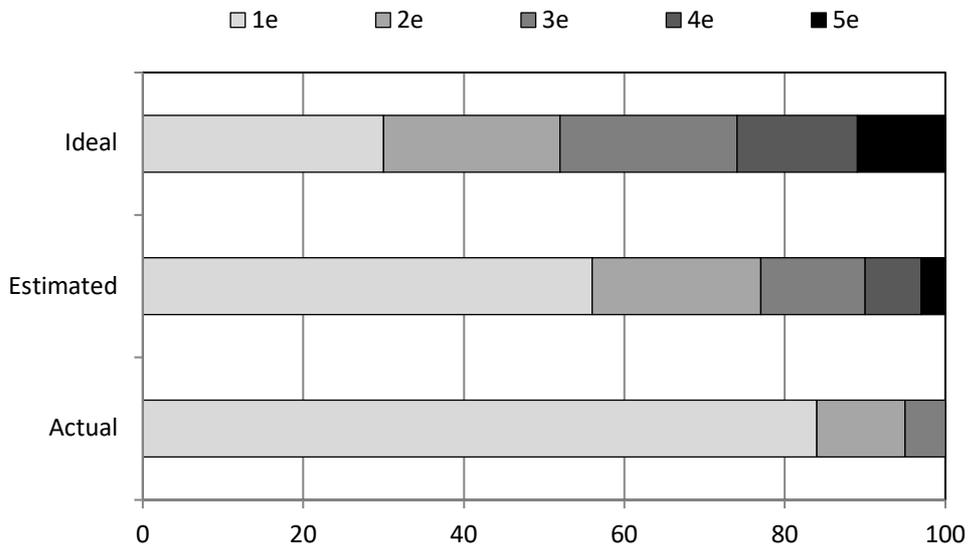


Figure 4
 Increase of life expectancy divided per quintiles:
 the ideal, the estimated ad the actual situation

