



Centre for Southeast European Studies
Zentrum für Südosteuropastudien



UNIVERSITY OF THE PELOPONNESE
Department of Political Science and
International Relations

Southeast European Studies Doctoral Studies Course on Methodology



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Human Resources Development,
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THE MEANING OF MORALITY: Sociological, psychoanalytical, sociobiological, critical and hermeneutical approaches



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The theoretical meaning of morality: how do we judge societies?

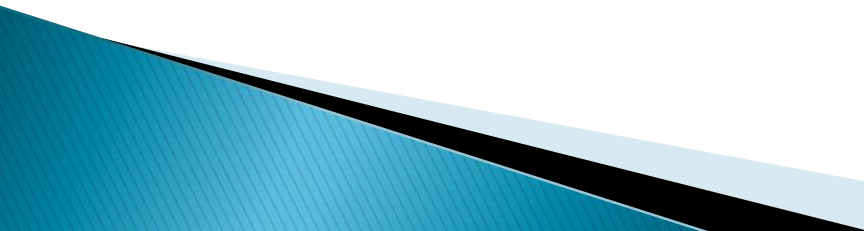
- ▶ The practical dilemma between particularism and universalism, patriotism and cosmopolitanism, has its counterpart on the theoretical level:
- ▶ When we face a human society, ours or another, we have two options:
 - evaluate it according to its own standards.
 - evaluate it according to some absolute, transhistorical standard.
- ▶ The first option corresponds to the idea of the moral good as a particular collective ideal.
- ▶ The second option corresponds to the idea of the moral good as the dignity of individuals beyond their particular collective identity.
- ▶ Sociological approaches follow the first option. Psychoanalytic and sociobiological approaches are divided. The critical approach follows the second option, while the hermeneutical approach represents an attempt to synthesis.

Let's illustrate the dilemma: the wrath of Achilles

- Achilles cedes [Briseis](#) to
- ▶ [Agamemnon](#), from the
- ▶ [House of the Tragic Poet](#) in
- ▶ [Pompeii](#), fresco,
- ▶ 1st century AD
- ▶ ([Naples National Archaeological Museum](#))
- Source:
- ▶ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Achilles



The sociological approach

- ▶ Every society has its own particular “cultural values”, which were very different from ours and which shape its particular identity. Allegiance to these values is the source of obligations that the individual is not free to ignore, or else he is exposed to social sanctions. At the same time they furnish the individual with a “higher of ideal self”, which corresponds to his social role. Because they furnish a strong identity, values are objects of desire. Sources of obligation and desire, cultural values can thus be called “moral goods”.
 - ▶ The significance of the good in this context dictates the way it should be distributed. Justice is shaped by the standards of excellence of this particular society. Social status determines individual rights as well as duties.
 - ▶ We can judge neither the idea of the moral good nor the idea of justice of a different society from a universal standpoint.
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The psychoanalytical approach

- ▶ Parents regulate the natural desires of their children by obliging them to interiorize the shared values of the community. Natural desires have to be repressed so that cultural values be interiorized.
- ▶ Because they cannot satisfy them directly, individuals sublimate natural desires and disguise them as higher and absolute ends – as « moral goods ». All individuals create a “super-ego” which contains the sublimated ends. The “super-egos” are culturally bound, the models of sublimation being chosen among cultural values.
- ▶ Moral goods differ from one society to the other, but their transmission by parents is a human constant. The demand for justice as equality is also universal, because it represents the denial by individuals of the exclusive love of the father so that other individuals also abandon their own claims for exclusivity.
- ▶ We cannot judge the idea of the moral good of a particular society but we can assess its application of the idea of justice as equality.

The socio-biological approach

- ▶ Altruism is the attitude of individuals who subject their own good to the good of the group to which they belong.
- ▶ The “moral good” lies in cooperation with the other members of his community because the survival of the genes of the individual is better assured by the survival of the community than by the survival of the individual. So cooperation in view of the good of the group is a higher good.
- ▶ We cannot judge the content of cooperation and the collective ends that demand the sacrifice of the individual. For every human group has the legitimate aim of collective survival.
- ▶ To this end, individuals must conform to the rules of cooperation which assure a reciprocity of conduct. When individuals promote their own self-interest, they play « free-riders » against the collective ends and the endanger community.
- ▶ So one can judge societies from the point of view of a universal rule of justice, which is the punishment of « free-riders ».

The critical approach

- ▶ A «moral good» has to be unconditional and independent from contingent appreciations. So it has to be detached from any collective identity. Cultural values are relative goods: they cannot be justified in an absolute manner.
- ▶ The only valuable justification is given by reason, which is the faculty of discovering and applying universal standards of evaluation, binding for every rational being. Cultural goods are the objects of choice; but the ground of any choice is the exercise of reason; therefore respecting free choice means respecting the beings capable of reasoning. So respect for rational autonomy and the rights of rational beings is the fundamental "moral good".
- ▶ Respecting rights implies distributing relative goods in a way that holds for every society, regardless of the specific significance of these goods.
- ▶ We can judge the highest cultural goods of a society in the light of the true moral good and apply the criteria of justice to this society in the light of absolute, transhistorical principles.

The hermeneutical approach

- ▶ If the moral good is not recognized by the other society, we can require its recognition.
- ▶ So we can bear an absolute judgment when we consider the "diversity of the good" among human societies.
- ▶ But whatever the worth of the collective goods of a society, its way to distribute them depends on their significance.
- ▶ So we cannot apply a universal principle of distribution that would abstract from the shared significance of the goods to be distributed.
- ▶ The significance of the goods is subject to internal debate; so any society has the means to interpret anew and re-adjust its principles of justice so that they be more in conformity with the significance of its goods.
- ▶ The debate on justice is internal to each society; but the debate on the ultimate worth of cultural goods as measured against the unique moral good is "internal" to humanity.