

# Life Experience and the “Emotional Matrix” of Moral Cognition: A Social Psychological Framework

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The sociological study of morality has recently seen a resurgence, despite barriers to a cohesive disciplinary presence (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010:6). As Hitlin and Vaisey note, there are scholars in different silos working on morality under different names, like “norms”, “values”, “codes” and “interaction orders”; but despite their diversity, these different research programmes share, in general, one of two definitions of morality: 1) the moral as a domain where notions of value are relevant (the “qualitative” definition) and 2) morality as “pro-social” or desirable objects or behaviour (the “quantitative” definition). There are then, following these two definitions, two different trajectories in the sociology of morality: one taking up the sources, histories and social consequences of particular sets of values, and the other concerned with conformity or non-conformity to values that are deemed socially desirable, either by the researchers or by publics. According to Hitlin and Vaisey, cultural and historical sociologists generally adopt the first definition, while social psychologists adopt the second. Hitlin and Vaisey point out, rightly, that any purported sociology of morality needs to adequately define its object before proceeding (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010:4-5). For the purposes of this paper, I examine the first trajectory, albeit from a social psychological point of view.

According to the qualitative definition of morality, some objects are morally “charged” and others are not. The roots of this qualitative definition of morality lie in Durkheim’s work, even though, as Chris Powell illustrates well, all of the so-called “founders” of sociology were concerned with morality in one way or another (Powell 2010). In Durkheim’s view, moral objects are those that are perceived as having particular authority or commanding “respect”:

An individual or collective subject is said to inspire respect when the representation that expresses it in consciousness has such power that it calls forth or inhibits conduct automatically, *irrespective of any utilitarian calculations of helpful or harmful results* (Durkheim 1995:209).

For Durkheim, such “collective representations” are commonly shared concepts, which make society collectively intelligible to its members and ultimately integrates individuals into the group. At Yet, classical theorists as disparate as Freud (1989a) and Goffman (1959) have argued that individuals do not automatically accede to the moral demands of social life, but often dissent from social mores, or uphold them at the price of internal conflict. Still, we can think of moral objects as those that activate a special kind of cognition, even if that cognition does not always result in socially-sanctioned behaviour. According to this qualitative definition, moral objects are things that compel individuals to take note of them as special, socially-relevant objects to which are attached rules of thought, conversation, representation, behaviour and so forth. In this basic sense, moral objects are those that prompt a particular kind of thinking – even though moral

objects do not necessarily compel automatic behaviour, they at least demand to be taken stock of. Conversely, we can define moral cognition variously as the automatic or deliberate assessment of such an object.

One of the key tasks of the sociology of morality is “[to uncover] the social antecedents of particular moral frameworks and their social and behavioural consequences” (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010). Moral frameworks, in this case, can be heuristically defined as the conceptual structures through which thinking about moral objects occurs. They could include orders of worth, for example, or indications of being socially “marked” or “unmarked” (Brekhus 2015:23). Metaphors, such as the ones analyzed by George Lakoff (1996) are another good example. Much of the classical sociological work on morality<sup>1</sup>, even if it diverges from Durkheim’s formal, holistic approach (Powell 2010:46-47), explicitly or implicitly adopts the task of uncovering the social roots of moral frameworks. This can be seen in how Marx, Durkheim and Weber each see morality not as absolute, but relative to different social abstractions – the functioning of society, class struggle and subjective interpretations of culture (Powell 2010:51). Although Durkheim, Weber and Marx saw different consequences to the historical changes in morality in the modern era – *anomie*, the colonization of moral thinking by instrumental calculation, and alienation, respectively (Durkheim 1951, Royce 2015, Weber 1989) -- all three thinkers recognized that moral frameworks need to be understood in the context of social relations.

While the relationship between moral frameworks and social life has remained central to the sociology of morality, the approaches to analyzing it range widely, from theories of ideology to studies of moral thinking. I limit my analysis to studies of moral thinking for two reasons. Firstly, a full consideration of how morality has been taken up across the spectrum of social theory would be beyond the scope of this paper. Secondly, a case can be made that an emphasis on the role of the individual in morality is both timely and theoretically necessary. Prominent social theorists from Michel Foucault (Foucault 2008), to Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, to Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman 2000, Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994, Giddens 1991) have discussed the individuation of economic, political and moral problems in modernity. In their view, it is now, more than ever, incumbent upon the individual to decide for herself – her identity, her products of choice, her political views – in short, her life. Even some symbolic interactionists, for whom reflexivity has always been central to the human mind, have pointed to an amplification of reflexivity in the “post-modern era” (Gergen 1991, Gubrium and Holstein 2000). Furthermore, both Anthony Giddens (1984) and Margaret Archer (2003) have argued that social life depends on individual reflexivity; it is precisely through the thinking agent that the effects of society on individual lives is mediated. For these reasons, it is imperative that sociologists develop adequate models of moral cognition.

In this paper, I develop an analytic social psychological model of moral cognition, and argue that moral thinking can only be fully understood in the context of character structure. Moral cognition has been taken up most recently by scholars in the Culture and Cognition tradition, so aside from analytic social psychology, that tradition will be the focus of this paper. Despite the utility of “toolkit” dual-process models in understanding moral cognition, there remain shortcomings in these approaches, specifically, in their capacity to explain why some moral frameworks become emotionally salient and others do not. Consequently, I develop a model, based on the analytic social psychology of Erich Fromm, to explain the emotional resonance of moral schema. Fromm’s conception of “character structure”, I argue, is particularly useful in this regard, since it allows us to think about the “emotional matrix” of moral schemas in the context of individuals’ lived experience of social structure.

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<sup>1</sup> Since Powell already treats morality in the classical tradition in great detail, I offer only a brief sketch here, for the purposes of tracing the “qualitative” definition of morality.

## Literature Review: Toolkit and Dual-Process Models of Moral Thinking

Although diverse sociological traditions feature theories of moral thinking, the most direct and prolonged contemporary treatments of moral cognition are to be found in the Culture and Cognition tradition.<sup>2</sup> Referring to the authors of the chapters in the landmark, *Culture in Mind*, Karen Cerulo writes that “each author considers cognition as an act of social beings—an act both enabled and constrained by one’s position in the complex web of social and cultural experience” (Cerulo 2002:3). Echoing the spirit of Cerulo’s claim, Brekhus writes “Despite the common feeling that our thoughts are individualistic in nature – private and uniquely our own – thinking is a distinctly social phenomenon. Our thoughts are co-produced within the cultures, subcultures, social networks, communities and organizations that we belong to” (Brekhus 2015:1). The Culture and Cognition tradition in sociology is thus motivated by the assumption that thinking – perception, attention, classification, and so forth – are a function of social life, and happen through the lens of culture.

In the Culture and Cognition tradition, the concern with moral reflexivity has manifested in a focus on what Gabriel Ignatow calls “mind-body connections” (Ignatow 2010:411), or attention to how moral thought is grounded in the individual, human body, with its capacities and limits. Ignatow provides a useful overview of three different models of mind-body connections, which are in effect three different conceptions of how moral thinking proceeds in the context of the human life: cognitivism, intuitionism and holism (Ignatow 2010:412). In the cognitivist model, which Ignatow identifies with Giddens and Kohlberg, “motivations that drive social judgements are conceived of as mainly cognitive in nature” – emotion is relatively unimportant as judgement is conceived of primarily as a matter of weighing potential actions impartially against some standard (Ignatow 2010:413). In intuitionist models, which find their origins in Hume, Nietzsche and American pragmatism, moral reflexivity is determined primarily by intuition (Ignatow 2010:415). Ignatow points to Pierre Bourdieu, Zygmunt Bauman and Jonathan Haidt as contemporary proponents of this position (Ignatow 2010:416).

The third, holistic approach, which includes Paul DiMaggio’s influential theorization of culture and cognition and Vaisey’s Dual-Process model, amongst others, features a “super-tight integration of mind and body” (Ignatow 2010:417). Cognitivism has been repeatedly criticized for “truncating” the role of affect and emotion, and where it recognizes such things – as in Giddens’ account for example – for reducing affect to a “one-dimensional” phenomenon (focusing only on shame or guilt, for example) (Ignatow 2010:414-15). Intuitionism, on the other hand, has been criticized for failing to attend to the question of universality, particularly regarding the scope of supposedly universal emotions and types of intuition, like empathy for instance (Ignatow 2010:417). Following the shortcomings of both cognitivist and intuitionist models, DiMaggio (2002) and Vaisey (2009) both propose dual models. In both of their accounts, conscious moral thinking occurs only when slow, cool, deliberative cognition is active, while automatic, “hot”, unconscious cognition is the default mode for most judgement (Ignatow 2010:417). However, according to Ignatow, dual-process models fail to recognize the extent to which automatic cognition is embodied (Ignatow 2010:417) – a point to which we will return shortly. Although Ignatow considers Ann Swidler’s work (Swidler 1986, 2001) as part of the

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<sup>2</sup> Morality has been taken up as an object of study in both symbolic interactionism and Foucauldian sociology. Nevertheless, both symbolic interactionists and sociologists inspired by Foucault tend to be focused on the interactional aspects of morality – like stigma, moral identity or moral subjectivity, for example – than the details of individual moral thinking. An exception here is recent work by Stets (See Stets, Jan E. 2010. “The Social Psychology of the Moral Identity.” Pp. 385-409 in *Handbook of the Sociology of Morality*, edited by S. Hitlin and S. Vaisey. New York: Springer.) and Stets and Carter Stets, Jan E. and Michael J. Carter. 2012. “A Theory of the Self for the Sociology of Morality.” *American Sociological Review* 77(1):120-40.), which is regrettably beyond the scope of this paper.

cognitivist approach, I discuss it in tandem with the dual-process model, since the dual-process model is in part constructed to incorporate Swidler's insights. Swidler's and Vaisey's models have been widely influential (Brekhus 2015:15-17), and should thus be considered the cornerstone of morality theory in Culture and Cognition.

Ann Swidler's "toolkit" model is one way of explaining how people use cultural materials to think about moral matters. In *Talk of Love*, Swidler takes up the "culture of love" as a case study of culture in action. That is, she is explicitly concerned with looking at "how culture works" (Swidler 2001), that is, how people use common sense in their everyday lives to construct their moral views. In Swidler's view, culture is not productive of a certain type of reflexivity – as it in Giddens' account for example – but rather, is used by agents to solve practical problems. As Brekhus notes, Swidler frames her account more in terms of cultural sociology than cognitive sociology. Still "[Swidler's] interest in which kinds of culture enter one's repertoire and which kinds of strategies of action come out of the toolkit at which times is implicitly cognitive" (Brekhus 2015:15-16). Taken in this way, Swidler offers an important theorization of how people make use of cultural materials to think. Swidler's principal conclusion is that rather than elaborating discursively an explicit moral framework, individuals draw on multiple cultural "repertoires" to meet the practical requirements of the social situations they face. Swidler describes, for example, one of her interview subjects use of conflicting cultural schema – marriage as voluntary choice and marriage as obligation – to justify his belief that his marriage was right for him (Swidler 2001:27). In Swidler's view, moral frameworks, at least as they are discursively expressed at the individual level, are a product of practical moral reasoning – the artful use of cultural material to defend a pre-existing position.

How are we to understand why people use particular frameworks and schemas at particular times? For Swidler, cultural frameworks become most influential when people's lives are "unsettled" (Swidler 2001:99), because they provide "doctrine, symbol and ritual" through which people can learn new, strategies of action (Swidler 2001:99). The utility of a cultural repertoire at a particular point in a person's life, rather than "enduring psychological proclivities" of that person (Swidler 1986:283), thus determine which frameworks will be used. In other words, people use the most convenient moral schemas for a given circumstance. It is thus in the social context that the psychological appeal of moral frameworks is to be found.

Stephen Vaisey draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, as well as that of cultural anthropologists Rod D'Andrade (1995), Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn (1997) to develop an alternative model of how people think about moral matters. Vaisey argues that if moral schemas are understood only as "tools" that can be adopted, they of course appear as fragmented (Vaisey 2009:1687). However, if one looks at longer, unconscious uses of moral schemas, they are unified by an underlying logic. Rather than seeing cultural schema as tools that can be "deployed", Vaisey sees schema as "deep, largely unconscious networks of neural associations that facilitate perception, interpretation, and action" (Vaisey 2009:1686). Swidler errs then, at least according to Vaisey, by only taking into account the conscious use of culture schemas, and then concluding, on that basis, that cultural schemas play no motivating role in moral cognition and behaviour. Revising Swidler's account, Vaisey proposes a "dual-process model" wherein "actors are driven primarily by deeply internalized schematic processes, yet they are also capable of deliberation and justification when required by the demands of social interaction" (2009:1687). The theoretical implication of Vaisey's model is that while moral reasoning at the discursive level of consciousness is fragmented, contradictory, and not significantly correlated with moral behaviour, deeper, unconscious moral schemas do determine moral behaviour in the long run (Vaisey 2009:1703-04).

The dual-process model thus includes "two tracks" of cognition; the deliberative consideration of moral objects through cultural frameworks, and the automatic, "gut" response to moral objects. It

does so primarily by positing an “unconscious” repository of cultural and moral schemas, one which each individual develops over the course of her life. While Swidler sees schemas as socially-circulated cultural “repertoires”, in the dual-process model, schemas are collections of neural networks, “cultural-cognitive structures (...) built up out of experience [that] allow a person to respond to stimuli in ways that are automatically generated by the weighted connections between the elements of the inputs at hand” (Vaisey 2009:1685-86). Firat and McPherson define them as “processes being constructed and perpetually reconstituted with experience, in relationship with others, and through development over the life course” (Firat and McPherson 2010:367) When such schemas become deeply internalized, they can motivate behaviour (Vaisey 2009:1686). When Vaisey argues then “a single, very general question about moral judgement, asked in a few seconds over the phone, turns out to be a better net predictor of deviance nearly three years later than household income, parents’ education, peer networks, family structure or church attendance” (Vaisey 2009:1703), he is making a case for the prevalence of unconscious, moral schemas in determining behaviour.

In dual-process models, the concept of “moral emotion” is used to explain the salience or “weight” of particular moral schemas. “Moral emotional qualities both act as precursors to [the activation of cultural schemas], and moral emotions are products of a persons’ [sic] response to schemas that are imaged in the mind” (Firat and McPherson 2010:377). In a 2014 study of the impact of moral emotions on the criminality outcomes of young offenders, Vaisey and Kramer found that a sense of shame was an important element in youths’ future behaviour: “to the extent that labeling by a legitimated authority – the courts, friends, and/or peers – triggers shame, an adolescent reports a greater desire to shift away from a fledgling criminal trajectory” (Vaisey and Kramer 2014:25). In this case then, we might suppose that once the young offenders were confronted with the consequences of their actions (Vaisey and Kramer 2014:20), they were activated several moral schemas – schemas for understanding what it meant to be a “good” member of the family, for example – and were confronted with dissonance between the schema and their criminal actions.

At base, however, such an account relies on an essentially functionalist theory of emotion:

Cultural schemas are laden with emotional content. Emotions are basic to our communication structures and understanding our worlds. (...) Because schemas are durable, shared, and order social life without conscious deliberation, our complex human socially world partially depends upon their existence and reproduction. Their quality of being shared, ordered, and transposable itself has an emotive quality, a quality of fundamental sociality that is entirely moral. (Firat and McPherson 2010:376)

But in cases where there is moral conflict around a particular issue or object how can we understand why one cultural schema predominates over others? In the Vaisey and Kramer study, for example, the legitimacy of the justice system is exogenous to the model. We might wonder, though, why the cultural schemas that cast the criminal justice system as a legitimate authority are important in some groups but not in others. In other words, we need a theory of emotions that explains how cultural schemas become emotional laden, even in cases where those schemas go against the grain of an existing social order. What explains why groups of people adopt moral schemas in the long-term?

### **An Analytic Social Psychology of Moral Schemas**

Considering the use of the concept of the “unconscious” and the developing focus on moral emotions, it is surprising that cognitive sociological theories of moral reflexivity have not engaged with psychoanalytic psychology. One might suppose that the neglect of

psychoanalysis in contemporary sociology of morality is due to the replacement of psychoanalysis by symbolic interactionism as the best theory of the individual in American sociology (Chancer 2013:453-54), and the general marginality of psychoanalysis in sociological theory (McLaughlin 2007:767). Nevertheless, the increasing focus on emotions and the unconscious, suggests a psychoanalytic approach might have something to contribute to a dual process or holistic theory of morality.

Erich Fromm's analytic social psychology, especially his conception of "social character" and its "emotional matrix", is a potentially advantageous way of understanding why particular moral frameworks or sets of cultural schema become emotionally powerful at particular times in history, for particular individuals. As such, I follow Neil McLaughlin's suggestion that Fromm provides a "sociologically adequate theory of emotions" and a "theory of emotional dynamics" (McLaughlin 1996:241, McLaughlin 2007). Although Fromm's framework has been adapted recently to studies in political sociology (David-West 2014) and criminology (Cheliotis 2013), his potential contributions to a holistic model of moral cognition have yet to be considered.

### *The psychological context of moral schemas: Character and the "Emotional Matrix"*

The basic theoretical problem with which we are dealing is how to understand the affective context of moral schemas: how do they become emotionally and cognitively salient in the long run? By building on Erich Fromm's analytic social psychology, we can see moral schemas as resting on the foundation of character structure. Furthermore, and crucially, by linking moral schemas to character structure, we can understand how and why particular moral schemas become important at particular times in history. Character structures are the more or less stable, orienting structures of our inner lives: they are the forms of our inner conversations, and the psychological contexts in which moral schemas should be understood. While individuals' use of cultural materials in the short term and across various interactive situations is indeed fragmented, long-term behaviour and thinking is best characterized in terms of moral schemas that are themselves rooted in socially-produced character structures.

Erich Fromm's thought is immediately amenable to Culture and Cognition approaches because he implicitly adopts a prototype of the dual-process model. Theories of culture and cognition generally tell us that if every thought, every cognitive process involved in sorting sensory data into meaningful experience were conscious, humans would be either overloaded with information or bogged down for hours in the most mundane actions. Luckily, unconscious, practical or "automatic cognition allows us to immediately generalize, to make snap judgements, and to act more or less on automatic pilot" (Brekhus 2015:28). Fromm foreshadows the culture and cognition view in the following statement: "If every decision were made on the basis of conscious deliberation, an individual would be overwhelmed by information and by doubt. Many vital decisions have to be made in a time range much shorter than a deliberation of what is best would require. Character, in the dynamic sense, becomes a substitute for instinct" (Fromm and Maccoby 1996:12). While conscious, deliberative thought is fairly amenable to short-term adaptation, character represents the intractable, deeply embodied aspects of the human mind: "Behavior, which is essentially an adaptation to realistic circumstances, changes relatively easily when circumstances make another kind of behavior more advisable; character traits usually persist even when they become harmful under changed circumstances (...)" (Fromm 1994:17).

What Fromm is describing is the difference between deliberately worked-out, socially-desirable behaviour (the kind that Swidler studies), on the one hand, and deeply-held, embodied orientations on the other. The use of particular cultural resources, is, after all, a kind of behaviour. Individuals, as Swidler demonstrates quite convincingly, will "adapt" to the social interaction or setting at hand. However, there is a limited emotional range within which culture

resources are deployed. As Fromm posits and Vaisey shows, the unity of cultural materials lie not in behaviour, but rather in embodied moral schema.<sup>3</sup> In other words, as far as moral thinking and behaviour goes, moral frameworks derive their meaning not just from their immediate interactive context, but also from the embodied, emotional context of a person's life. Using Erich Fromm's analytic social psychology, which he builds from Freud's psychology,<sup>4</sup> we can theoretically specify the embedding of moral schema in concrete human lives.

Fromm builds his dual-track theory of cognition from Freud's psychology. One of the basic theoretical problems of classical psychoanalysis is the conflict between the "rational" demands of society and the "irrational" drives of human instinct. As opposed to pragmatism or symbolic interactionism which place rationality at the centre of human action and communication, Freud's psychological theory describes the conflict between the "rational" requirements of social action and the "irrationality" of human drives (Jones 1980). Taking on the "Hobbesian problem" (Cheliotis 2011, Wrong 1961), Freud proposes that culture is produced only by the repression of human instinct, a process which Freud calls "sublimation" (Freud 1989a:51, Freud 1995:198). This is of course is true ontogenetically as well as phylogenetically, as through socialization, the individual infant gradually finds the "pleasure principle" – the drive to satisfaction – replaced by the "reality principle" – the need to continue confronting reality at hand for the purposes of survival (Freud 1995 (1911):302-03). From the beginning then, we can see that Freud offers a holistic model of human cognition: conscious thought, geared towards the reality principle, occurs on the surface of a deeper vessel that also includes a mental process concerned with emotional satisfaction. In terms of moral cognition, analytic social psychology can show how the ephemeral and "irrational" (read, fragmented) use of cultural materials is grounded in the "rationality" of social character.

A true sociology of moral cognition, however, needs to follow Fromm in leaving Freud behind on the point of instinct. Drawing from Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan, Fromm critiques the biologically-deterministic aspects of Freud's theory of sublimation and repression. The problem with Freud's theory is that it casts the relationship between the individual and society as "static" and universal (Fromm 1969:25-26). Indeed, for Freud, every civilization is premised on the repression of the same instincts, namely the pleasure principle and the death instinct. This leads, according to Fromm, to a version of psychoanalytic theory that characterizes human relationships in terms of these repressed instincts, which inevitably, as the theory goes, resurface back into social life as various neuroses (Fromm 1969:26). For Freud, in effect, while the demands placed onto the reality principle by society are dynamic, the pleasure principle, at base, is always motivated by the same set of instincts. This view leaves us with only a speculative grasp of moral thinking, and thus cannot serve as the ground for a sociological theory of morality.

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<sup>3</sup> A key reference point for cognitive sociological approaches to morality is Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the habitus. Nevertheless, a comparison of Fromm's analytic social psychology with Bourdieu's approach has been undertaken by Cheliotis Cheliotis, Leonidas. 2011. "For a Freudo-Marxist Critique of Social Domination: Rediscovering Erich Fromm through the Mirror of Pierre Bourdieu." *Journal of Classical Sociology* 11(4):438-61.. The goal here then is not to reconstitute Erich Fromm's analytic social psychology as a unified theoretical framework in opposition to Bourdieu's, but rather to show how several of the former's concepts, most notably his concept of "character structure", can be adapted to explaining the salience of moral schemas.

<sup>4</sup> Although Fromm's theory is based on a synthesis of Marx and Freud *ibid.*, McLaughlin, Neil. 1996. "Nazism, Nationalism, and the Sociology of Emotions: Escape from Freedom Revisited." *Sociological Theory* 14(3):241-61., the aspects of his thinking most relevant to the moral schemas are associated more with psychoanalysis than historical materialism; concepts like the social unconscious and social character need to be thought through in primarily psychoanalytic, rather than Marxist terms.

Fromm breaks with Freud over the role of basic instinct in human life. Cheliotis writes: “Whilst paying respect to Freud, Fromm counter-argues that the instinctual structure, much like the structure and demands of society at large, is neither a given nor, in any case, unmodifiable. To Fromm, the only fundamental, and fundamentally normal, biological drive in man is *biophilia*, the affinity to life and growth” (Cheliotis 2011:449) or a general “human energy” (Fromm 1969:305). While it might be a bit premature to state the *biophilia* is the only fundamental human drive – “the need to be productive, to reason, to be self-directed, and to be social” have also been included in Fromm’s ontology (Leyva 2014:4) – it is clear that for Fromm the central subject matter of analytic social psychology is the series of drives created by the societal transformation of the human being. Fromm writes that “the key problem of psychology is that of the specific kind of relations of the individual towards the world and not that of satisfaction or frustration of this or that instinctual need *per se*” (Fromm 1969:26-27). In this sense Fromm, in an early formulation of ideas that would later be taken up by relational psychoanalysis (McLaughlin 1996:246), sets the relationship between character and society, rather than the relationship between character and instinct, at the core of psychology.<sup>5</sup> Fromm thus replaces Freud’s concept of instinct with the concept of character.

Following this, Fromm argues that the central task of social psychology is to understand the social process through which human character is created:

The most beautiful as well as the most ugly inclinations of man are not part of a fixed and biologically given human nature, but result from the social process that creates man. In other words, society has not only a suppressing function – although it has that too – but it has also a creative function. Man’s nature, his passions, and his anxieties are a cultural product; as a matter of fact, man himself is the most important creation and achievement of the continuous human effort, the result of which we call history. (Fromm 1969:27)

While for Freud, universally present human drives are transformed by civilization, for Fromm, human drives, structured into specific “character orientations” are a product of the particular social conditions prevailing in a given society. In terms of ontology, this assumption has important consequences. Rather than setting human drives, as a function of instincts, anterior to social life, Fromm recognizes that human drives are a social product. For Fromm, motivation is created by the transformation human needs by the social structure of a particular era and place. Motivation is thus organized into a “character structure” or “social character”: “Character in the dynamic sense of analytic psychology is the specific form in which human energy is shaped by the dynamic adaptation of human needs to the particular mode of existence of a given society” (Fromm 1969:305). Elsewhere he defines social character as a “‘character matrix,’ a *syndrome of character traits which has developed as an adaptation to the economic, social, and cultural conditions common to that group*” (Fromm and Maccoby 1996:16). But why should this in itself lead to motivation? For Fromm, dynamic adaptation creates new anxieties and drives in the individual.

It is important to note that for Fromm, although emotional drives are created by social structure, the human body is universal, and as such, sets the terms in which the social production of human drives occurs. While some aspects of human existence are “malleable”, others, like the need to subsist and to relate oneself to others, are not (Fromm 1969:31-32). The individual has

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<sup>5</sup> Fromm notes that although Freud is misguided on the role of instinct in his discussion of the anal character, Freud’s essential insight was that people can be motivated by durable character traits that have their origins in the emotional dynamics of a person’s psyche (Fromm, 1996: 9-10) (See Freud, Sigmund. 1989b. “Character and Anal Erotism.” Pp. 293-96 in *The Freud Reader*, edited by P. Gay. New York W.W. Norton and Company.).



universally to both “acquire and [assimilate] things” and [relate] himself to people” (Fromm and Maccoby 1996): “When man is born, the stage is set for him. He has to eat and drink, and therefore he has to work; and this means he has to work under the particular conditions and in the ways that are determined for him by the kind of society into which he is born. Both factors, his need to live and the social system, in principle are unalterable by him as an individual, and they are the factors which determine the development of those other traits that show greater plasticity” (Fromm 1969:33). What emerges from this dynamic adaptation are particular traits, for example, “the lust for power”, which “develop as a reaction to certain life conditions” (Fromm 1969:31). Thus Fromm notes that character is formed in relation to distinct orders of reality, one related to practical existence in the world, and the other related to human bonds and ties.

Fromm uses the concept of character to show how moral frameworks rest on a deep, emotional edifice of social character. He builds his case by synthesizing Marx and Freud’s comments on ideas. For Marx, “The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life” (Marx 1978:154). Freud, for his part, argues in *The Future of an Illusion* (1961) and in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1989a), that ideas, in particular religious and moral ideas, answer to the desires and fears produced by socialization. For Fromm, Freud’s theory, despite its flaws, is useful for understanding the emotional basis of consciousness; while orthodox historical materialism can show how ideologies support a society’s class structure, it cannot show how such ideologies gain emotional support amongst individuals (McLaughlin 1996:245). Synthesized by Fromm, however, Marx and Freud’s insights provide a powerful theory of how social conditions set the emotional context out of which powerful moral forces emerge.

Fromm’s assertion that “the influence of any doctrine or idea depends on the extent to which it appeals to psychic needs in the character structure of those to whom it is addressed” (Fromm 1969:83), is supported by his analysis of the Protestant Reformation. Max Weber’s work, especially the aspects dealing with the subjective aspects of labour and social organization, was highly influential for Fromm (Smith 1998:56). I mention this here because Fromm’s explanation of the salience Reformation ideas can be seen as a discussion of how moral schemas are rooted in social character. Fromm faults Weber for being too “idealistic”, that is, for ascribing ideas too much causal power. Although Weber explains how Protestantism recast the moral framework in which labour was perceived, Weber’s account, Fromm recognizes, is missing a theory of motivation, or the particular “social character” that made Calvinism and Lutheranism widely appealing to the European middle-class in the first place (Fromm 1969:324) For Fromm then, the problem is to explain how Luther’s and Calvin’s ideas particularly appealed to the Western-European middle-class character structure.

Fromm explains the appeal of Protestant ideas as a function of a new character structure produced by the transition from a relatively stable medieval European economic order to a more dynamic capitalist one. In medieval Europe, social roles were relatively fixed, and most people had a solid and well-known place in the social order. People were secured to the world by stable ties (Fromm 1969:59). By the time of the Renaissance, however, expanded commercial activity was beginning to break down the traditional ties that fixed people to the social order. For the moneyed class, freedom was increased: “Man discovers himself and others as individuals, as separate entities; he discovers nature as something apart from himself in two aspects: as an object of theoretical and practical mastery, and in its beauty, as an object of pleasure” (Fromm 1969:62). In the middle and lower classes, the individual emerged much later, during the Reformation. While in the middle ages, economic interests were subordinate to moral ones – as Weber argued – and economic conduct was embedded in the entirety of personal conduct, this scenario was changing by the early sixteenth century (Fromm 1969:71-73). A move towards large-scale capitalism in the craft guilds, heavy industry and the commercial sector meant that

the traditional stability of the middle class was threatened. For the peasantry, the privatization of common lands often meant that they were no longer privileged to their ancestral holdings (Fromm 1969:75-76). The result, according to Fromm, is a “restlessness” among the lower and middle classes: “The individual was left alone; everything depended on his own effort, not on the security of his traditional status” (Fromm 1969:77). The birth of this capitalist individual resulted in “a deep feeling of insecurity, powerlessness, doubt, aloneness and anxiety” (Fromm 1969:81), a feeling which was crystallized in a new character structure premised on ontological insecurity.

According to Fromm, the Lutheran and Calvinist ideas of the Reformation became widespread precisely because they encapsulated, amplified, and in a sense, provided a solution – although perhaps a neurotic one -- to the ontological insecurity in the middle-class character structure. By emphasizing the essential evil and powerlessness of humanity, Fromm argues, Luther captures the spirit of the new economic order – individuals are ultimately powerless in the face of their own vile nature and the infinite wisdom of God. On the one hand, this doctrine appealed to the lower and middle classes, because it spoke to their own economic situation. On the other hand, the acceptance of this kind of doctrine only exacerbated their anxiety (Fromm 1969:96-97). Faith, Luther’s solution to the anxiety induced by his sense of powerless, is thus a kind of neurotic compulsion, through which “the individual succeeds in eliminating the conspicuous suffering but not in removing the underlying conflict and silent unhappiness” (Fromm 1969:175). He offers total, masochistic submission to God, as a solution to his and others’ radical doubts about their social and economic existence (Fromm 1969:100). On Calvin’s part, the doctrine of Predestination stands out as the main solution to the same feelings of anxiety and loneliness. Unsure about their spiritual fate, the middle and lower classes adopted a mantra of unceasing activity in a vain attempt to overcome existential anxiety: “Activity in this sense assumes a compulsory quality: the individual has to be active to overcome his feeling of doubt and powerlessness. This kind of activity is not the result of inner strength and self-confidence; it is a desperate escape from anxiety” (Fromm 1969:111)..

Revisiting Fromm’s account of the Reformation in terms of moral schema reveals how such schema rest on an “emotional matrix” created by character structure. After all, Protestant “ideas” were not just a set of concepts – they carried with them, the nascent “spirit of capitalism”: a “frame of mind” that contains “an ethically oriented maxim for the organization of life” (Weber 2011:81-82). Thus, when Fromm writes about the “new freedom” brought on by the dissolution of medieval society, which “brought (...) an increased feeling of strength and at the same time an increased isolation, doubt, scepticism, and – resulting from all these – anxiety” (Fromm 1969:65), he is speaking of the emotional matrix to which the Protestant, and later capitalist, moral schema appeals. Using Fromm’s insights, sociologists of morality can go beyond demonstrating the existing of unconscious moral schema; they gain the capacity to explain why particular moral schema become emotionally laden at particular times.

## **Conclusion:**

### **Uncovering the Psychological Roots of Moral Frameworks in Character Structure**

Based on the potential contributions of Fromm’s theory, it is possible to outline a programme of research for studying moral frameworks. In *Social Character in a Mexican Village*, Fromm and Maccoby employ what they call an “interpretive” method. They begin by developing ideal-typical character orientations (Fromm and Maccoby 1996:69-82), the presence of which they measure using semi-structured interviews. They use the semi-structured interview, rather than a classical psychoanalytic interview, because the latter would be too-consuming to do on a large scale, and furthermore, few people would consent to such a procedure (Fromm and Maccoby 1996:23). Maccoby and Fromm developed an “interpretive questionnaire”, which Fromm first used in

studies of the authoritarian character, “to determine the individual’s mode of assimilation, mode of relatedness and parental fixations” (Fromm and Maccoby 1996:30). The goal for Fromm and Maccoby was to determine the main influences on the character structure of the individuals involved in the study, thus testing the degree of correlation between the “emotional attitudes [of the peasant] (...) and the socioeconomic conditions under which he lives” (Fromm and Maccoby 1996:1)

Although such a method is no doubt valuable for determining the relationship between social structure and character structure, it is in reality the second step of investigations of moral cognition. More amenable to the framework proposed here is a research design that begins with a particular moral framework. The research process, following this model, would consist of the following steps:

- 1) Identification of a particular morally salient issue in a particular context (debates over physician-assisted dying in Canada, for example)
- 2) Identification of different moral schemas regarding this issue (for instance, pro- and con)
- 3) Semi-structured interviews and life-history interviews to determine their character structures.
- 4) Identification of common modalities in the character (social character), followed by theorization of how character is produced by social structure.

The goal of such a procedure would be to uncover the character structure that lie underneath particular moral frameworks. The use of interviews with a dual-process framework is not uncontroversial. Vaisey recommends against using interviews to access unconscious moral schemas, because, he argues, interview data is only evidence of the superficial, “deliberative” consciousness, which interviewees adapt to the interview or their life circumstances at the time (Vaisey 2009:1689). Nevertheless, psychoanalytic method tells us that it is possible to access automatic, unconscious thought processes in an interview, if one attends to the form of the respondents’ answers as well as the substantive content. Although an extended discussion of this point is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth reproducing Fromm’s words on this problem here:

Our knowledge of the unconscious motivation of a person is not derived primarily when he speaks in general or in abstract terms, but in the very small details of his expressions and formulations, the precise words he uses, or in the contradictions, unconscious to him, between various statements, or in the unwarranted over-emphasis of the one or the feeling. It is the small detail in behaviour and expression which is important in psychoanalytic investigation, not that which is embodied in general statements of opinions and beliefs. (Fromm and Maccoby 1996:29)

We would thus expect, in interviews, to hear respondents draw upon contradictory, fragmented, and widely circulated cultural materials when discussing a moral issue. The use of the analytic method, however, would permit the researcher to discover both the unstated moral schemas unifying such disparate cultural materials, and the antecedent social character from which the schemas gain their emotional resonance.

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