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Folklore and Moral Foundations – a Sneak Preview

This paper is part of a larger project in which we rely on different kinds of folklore as sources of information regarding the values, norms, and attitudes held dear in historical societies (cf. Michalopoulos and Xue, 2021). Acquiring a deeper understanding of such concepts in past societies is likely to improve our understanding of the role social norms play for (economic) development.

To date, we have collected close to 10,000 pieces of folklore from all over the world. In this particular paper, we analyze to what degree different historical societies promoted different moral foundations. We hypothesize that differences in moral foundations will not only be reflected in the way people interact with each other but also in the laws and policies of modern nation-states. Folklore is likely to reflect social norms and social capital (Cao et al., 2021), but also in the kind of values that get enshrined by formal institutions such as constitutions and subsequent law-making.

The term folklore refers to “all the forms of cultural learning passed on by word of mouth or personal example in any group ... Folklore includes all the traditional forms of expression that circulate without the aid of books” (Jones 2013, 2). One way to take account of different types of folklore is to distinguish between myth, legend, and folktale (ibid., 8). Among folktales, four different types are usually distinguished, namely (1) fables, (2) jokes, (3) novellas, and (4) fairy tales.

Folktale scholars hold that it is one common function of folktales “to preserve and promote cultural and personal values... In traditional fairy tales morals typically center around the preservation of existing values and the maintenance of social stability” (Ashliman 2004, 4). Fairy tales would be “veritable catalogs of ancient beliefs and practices...” (ibid., 15). Based on these evaluations, inferring historically praised moral foundations from analyzing folklore seems straightforward.

Ex ante, it is not self-evident what type of folktale and even what type(s) of folklore are optimal as a basis for the analysis here carried out. Legends “serve as social guidelines for behavior and are regarded as having a certain historical and cultural truth embodied in them.” (Jones 2013, 9) This would seem to make them excellent candidates for inclusion in our dataset. Then again, “the cosmology depicted in fairy tale is also frequently connected to social institutions, suggesting

that these institutions are ‘natural’, that is, cosmically sanctioned and therefore justified” (ibid., 20).

So there are good reasons for focusing on legends, but also good ones for focusing on folktales. We chose a pragmatic solution here: to maximize the size of our corpus, we included both legends and folktales. To know whether reliance on one or the other does make a difference, we do not only analyze all types of folklore jointly but also each type separately.

Determining the geographical origin of a piece of folklore as well as its age has been a challenge to folklore research for a long time. Important advances have been made with regards to geographical origins recently relying on phylogenetic approaches (da Silva & Tehrani 2016) and even genomic data (Bortolini et al. 2017). Ashliman (2004, 13ff.) lists many folktales that can unambiguously be dated to the time B.C. The fables attributed to Aesop, e.g., have been known since the fifth century B.C.; while the Jataka, a collection of more than 500 anecdotes and fables that are part of the Buddhist canon is dated between 300 B.C. and 400 A.D.

Regarding the issues of both geographical origin as well as age, folktale scholars offer reassuring conclusions. Jones (2013, 7) argues that if the same fairy tale is known among different groups, this can be interpreted as a sign that the story has been around for a long time – and was not invented by an author only recently. Ashliman (2004, 16) concludes that there is “good evidence that most of our popular tales ... assumed their current forms in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, making them some 500 years old, give or take a century or two.” These summaries are reassuring as they indicate that folktales – and folklore more generally – can be used as a cumulative archive for the moral foundations held by historical societies.

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) has been developed in response to theories that claim that the development of moral norms has been driven by reason alone and that the moral norms such construed are shared universally. Instead, the proponents of MFT argue that moral foundations are based on intuitions and that the actual manifestation of particular moral norms can be explained with the actual challenges that humans faced during evolution (Oyserman, 2017). Since not all groups are subject to the same challenges, moral norms diverge across groups and there is no moral universalism.

Haidt and his various co-authors propose to distinguish five moral foundations (2012, 178f.): (1) The care/harm foundation which evolved in response to the challenge of protecting vulnerable children. (2) The fairness/cheating foundation which evolved in response to the challenge of reaping the benefits of cooperation and to protect against being exploited. (3) The loyalty/betrayal foundation which evolved in response to the challenge of forming and maintaining coalitions. (4) The authority/subversion foundation which evolved in response to the challenge of reaping the benefits of social hierarchies. (5) The purity /sanctity foundation which evolved in response to the challenge of pathogens and parasites. In addition, it is often interpreted as reflecting sanctity as preached by various religions (“my body is my temple”).

The development of the theory, the means used to test it and the internal and external validity are described in Graham et al. (2011, 5f.).¹ In that paper, the authors refer to the harm/care and fairness/cheating dimension as “individualizing foundations” and the other three moral concerns as “binding foundations”. The concerns regarding the first two dimensions are so widespread that they may be referred to as universally shared moral concerns which, apparently, is not the case with regards to the binding foundations.

To identify the various moral foundations promoted in any kind of text, MFT scholars have produced dictionaries containing some 200 words for each of the five moral foundations. We analyze the relative weight attributed to them by calculating the number of words referring to a particular moral foundation divided by the number of words contained in the entire folktale.

In the meantime, a number of proposals for additional moral foundations have been advanced. Haidt (2012, 197ff.), e.g., proposes to include liberty/oppression as a sixth dimension. But as of today, Haidt and his co-authors have not come up with a corresponding dictionary. One value added of our paper is that we here present our own dictionary of the liberty/oppression moral foundation and use it to identify the relevance of this moral foundation in our folktale corpus.

This paper therefore adds to the emerging research on folklore by economists. Michalopoulos and Xue (2021), relying on an analysis of the motifs, i.e. the main

¹ The theory has not remained uncontested and has been criticized from various angles such as neuroscience (Suhler and Churchland 2011), the reliability of its questionnaire (Tamul et al. 2020), the relationship between moral foundations and political preferences (Kivikangas et al. 2021) and others. Haidt & Joseph (2011) is an early reply to critics.

analytical unit in a tale, covered by folklore, validate the material analyzed as reflecting the geographical surrounding in which it emerged. Our paper, in turn, relies on folktales and myths in their entirety enabling us to extract more detail from them.

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