

as initiation rites, witchcraft, and religion) are to some extent shaped by concepts and desires rooted deep within the human mind, which explains why they often take similar forms on different continents.

I was particularly drawn to a new theory of morality Shweder had developed based on his research in Orissa (which I described in chapter 1). After he published that study, he and his colleagues continued to analyze the six hundred interview transcripts they had collected. They found three major clusters of moral themes, which they called the ethics of autonomy, community, and divinity.¹⁰ Each one is based on a different idea about what a person really is.

The ethic of *autonomy* is based on the idea that people are, first and foremost, autonomous individuals with wants, needs, and preferences. People should be free to satisfy these wants, needs, and preferences as they see fit, and so societies develop moral concepts such as rights, liberty, and justice, which allow people to coexist peacefully without interfering too much in each other's projects. This is the dominant ethic in individualistic societies. You find it in the writings of utilitarians such as John Stuart Mill and Peter Singer¹¹ (who value justice and rights only to the extent that they increase human welfare), and you find it in the writings of deontologists such as Kant and Kohlberg (who prize justice and rights even in cases where doing so may reduce overall welfare).

But as soon as you step outside of Western secular society, you hear people talking in two additional moral languages. The ethic of *community* is based on the idea that people are, first and foremost, members of larger entities such as families, teams, armies, companies, tribes, and nations. These larger entities are more than the sum of the people who compose them; they are real, they matter, and they must be protected. People have an obligation to play their assigned roles in these

entities. Many societies therefore develop moral concepts such as duty, hierarchy, respect, reputation, and patriotism. In such societies, the Western insistence that people should design their own lives and pursue their own goals seems selfish and dangerous—a sure way to weaken the social fabric and destroy the institutions and collective entities upon which everyone depends.

The ethic of *divinity* is based on the idea that people are, first and foremost, temporary vessels within which a divine soul has been implanted.¹² People are not just animals with an extra serving of consciousness; they are children of God and should behave accordingly. The body is a temple, not a playground. Even if it does no harm and violates nobody's rights when a man has sex with a chicken carcass, he still shouldn't do it because it degrades him, dishonors his creator, and violates the sacred order of the universe. Many societies therefore develop moral concepts such as sanctity and sin, purity and pollution, elevation and degradation. In such societies, the personal liberty of secular Western nations looks like libertinism, hedonism, and a celebration of humanity's baser instincts.¹³

I first read about Shweder's three ethics in 1991, after I had collected my data in Brazil but before I had written my dissertation. I realized that all of my best stories—the ones that got people to react emotionally without being able to find a victim—involved either disrespect, which violated the ethics of community (for example, using a flag as a rag), or disgust and carnality, which violated the ethics of divinity (for example, the thing with the chicken).

I used Shweder's theory to analyze the justifications people gave (when I asked them "Can you tell me why?"), and it worked like magic. The Penn students spoke almost exclusively in the language of the ethic of autonomy, whereas the