

Moral Order

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Moral order is a central dimension of culture. Generally, the term refers to any system of obligations that defines and organizes the proper—good, right, virtuous—relations among individuals and groups in a community. Such systems derive from religions, traditions (Romantic individualism, natural law theory, etc.), or ideologies. They are expressed explicitly in institutional rules, laws, moral codes, and the like, as well as implicitly in the various roles, rites, and rituals of social life. Complex societies like the United States involve competing and amalgamated moral orders.

This understanding of moral order is useful as far as it goes, but it can also be somewhat misleading. It tends to draw our attention to moral rules and normative expectations and away from a more fundamental level on which features of the world are ordered and infused with moral significance. Moral order is also present in the very conceptualizing and structuring of reality. Illuminating moral order at this level was the life-long project of the British social anthropologist Mary Douglas. She conceived of order as how we assign and keep things in their “place,” and her work explored how we react when things get out of place.

Douglas’s work began with and extended the insights of Émile Durkheim,

the early French sociologist. Tribal societies, Durkheim showed, are held together by shared categories of thought and social demarcation. These societies provide the classification systems—including categories of time, space, and causality—and the metaphors that guide their members and make collective action possible. In modern societies, however, this common symbolic life is ruptured. Now, Durkheim argued, unity flows from an interdependence created by the complex division of labor, and some truths, especially those of science, are not social but “express the world as it is.” Mary Douglas rejected this sharp distinction between primitive and modern societies, and its social exemption of modern intellectual achievements. “It is easier to see that tribesmen project the moral order upon their universe,” she wrote in *Implicit Meanings*, “than to recognize the same process working among ourselves.” For Douglas, shared classifications constitute a central and inescapable dimension of order in all human societies. Making distinctions through socially provided categories, kinds, and definitions is how we transform unorganized needs and experience into meaningful forms. It is how we know, for instance, what it is permissible to eat, where, at what times, and with whom.

Our classifications, however, are not arbitrary nor are they merely questions of “the world as it is.” Accepted classifications, Douglas emphasized, draw the lines of the world; they define what is real, what is natural, what is right and just. Things have a place and they *belong* in that place. The moral dimension to this sorting and boundary drawing is most evident when objects, behaviors, or ideas are out of place—when they “blur, smudge, contradict, or otherwise confuse accepted classifications.” Some (not all) of this “out of place” is dirt, defilement, deviance: our response is to condemn it and to enact rituals—as simple as washing one’s hands—that re-establish the proper order.

Douglas’s conception of moral order, then, goes deeper than beliefs about mutual obligation. And it contradicts the commonplace classification of domains of life into those that are value-laden (religion, family life, poetry) and those that are “neutral” or value-free (the liberal state, science, the capitalist market). She shows us that we too project a moral order upon our universe and actively work to defend and uphold it.

Dame Mary Douglas died in May 2007. She was 86. ■