NICHOLAS HOOVER WILSON

The Fixation of (Moral) Belief
Making Imperial Administration Modern

Abstract

This article argues that the transition between early-modern and modern organization of empires—especially the administrative outlooks and institutional logics used to govern them—revolved around how moral conflict was viewed within imperial organizations themselves and by metropolitan audiences. Early modern imperial organizations were deeply patrimonial, and hence relied on a style of embedded moral reasoning that distanced and segmented their affairs from the metropole. By contrast, modern empires order what they govern in hierarchies that are nominally objective and whose criteria seem universal. Using a case study of the British Empire's crisis and transformation at the turn of the 19th century, I argue that modern imperial administration emerged because networks of moral justification, which provided the scaffolding for patrimonial early-modern empire, eroded in the face of "disinterested" metropolitan scrutiny. This scrutiny created an audience for bitter political and moral conflicts among imperial administrators, who then used disembedded moral claims to mobilize support.

Keywords: Morality; Empire; Public administration; State formation.

"The propriety of our moral sentiments is never so apt to be corrupted, as when the indulgent and partial spectator is at hand, while the indifferent and impartial one is at a great distance."
Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [2002 [1790]]: 179.

"There are real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those realities affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really are, and any man, if he have sufficient experience and reason enough about it, will be led to the one true conclusion." Charles S. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief" [1997][1877] in Louis Menand [Ed.] *Pragmatism: A Reader*: 21.

IN THESE TWO PASSAGES, Adam Smith and Charles S. Peirce at first seem to be explaining very different things—respectively,

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the "Conduct and Character" necessary for a dynamic, commercial 18th century and the experiential foundations of modern science in the 19th. On closer consideration, however, "moral sensibility" and "real things" play very similar roles in their theories of social order. For Smith, "moral sensibility" is the ultimate guide for "the propriety of our own conduct" [29]; and for Peirce, establishing accurate beliefs about the world "is a more or less sure indication of there being established in our nature some habit which will determine our actions" [13]. For both Smith and Peirce, moreover, these understandings of the nature of the world and one's proper behavior in it are established through dialog with others. Smith suggests that this is a matter of assembling an audience of right-thinking spectators, because to behave in the view of "partial" or "interested" observers risks having one's perspective "corrupted." Peirce, meanwhile, argues that one can rest assured that if spectators have sufficient "reason" and "experience," these differences in perspective can be balanced to achieve "the one true conclusion."

Viewed through the lens of the resurgent sociology of morality—how social relations relate to our understanding of good and bad ways of acting and being in the world—Smith and Peirce thus represent two very different positions about the nature of morality [Abend 2008]. The "Weberian" position, here represented by Smith, assumes that moral reality is *relativist*, which is to say, relative to a particular standard of judgment and concrete set of social relations. Smith therefore warns that if an actual community of moral judgment is poorly composed, so too will be the moral world one inhabits and uses to guide action. By contrast, Peirce articulates the "Durkheimian" position, which suggests that morality can be approached through *realism*—the notion that morality is "objective" and observer-independent. Peirce's argument, in other words, works because the apparatus of science provides the best means for communities of people to understand what the world is actually like, irrespective of their opinions about it.

Like Abend, I am wary of trying to directly resolve the tension between these two positions. In this article, instead, I would rather recognize them as alternative *empirical possibilities*. At different historical moments, as I will try to show, people thought of their moral worlds as deeply contextual and relative to the judgment of local communities, as Smith articulates; while at other times, their moral worlds seemed to be structured by disembedded moral "facts" like those represented by Peirce. Indeed, when thinking of the *historical* sociology of morality, one important research program is to explain the transition between these two modes of moral logic.

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The key, I suggest below, lies in Smith's argument about social and physical distance and its role in intra-organizational conflict. During these conflicts, participants seek to mobilize observers across a series of "linked ecologies" [Abbott 2005]. When these are self-contained and populated by observers biographically familiar with the details of "distant" conflicts, the logic of mobilization and relevant moral appeals are likely to be contextualist, emphasizing concrete social ties and propriety. But when these conflicts are observed by observers *un*familiar with the details of local conflict, moral appeals to mobilize on the behalf of participants are much more successful when they are justified in terms of quasi-universal moral norms. The explanation for the transition between Smith's and Peirce's position, in other words, lies in the changing way that intra-organizational moral conflicts were embedded in a wider network of observers.

This explanation is especially useful, I will also suggest, when it is related to the substantive problem of imperial administration. Between the 18th and 19th centuries, a sea-change occurred in the way in which European empires worked, as an older patrimonial, personalistic, ecumenical, and flexible mode of organizing administration gave way to a rigid, impersonal, objectifying sensibility rooted in what Chatterjee has called the "rule of colonial difference" [1993]. As I will seek to outline below through a variety of primary and secondary evidence, in one of the key nodes of this transition—the English East India Company's administration of India between the 18th and 19th centuries—administrators refigured their self-descriptions of what they were doing as the East India Company itself experienced a changing relationship to the British state and public. In the 18th century, officials' "moral background" [Abend 2014] was deeply contextualist, relying (as it did for Smith) on the concrete judgment of real peers who shared Indian experience, both in India itself and in London. After a period of chaotic conflict at the turn of the 19th century, however, a much more abstract moral situation predicated on duty to a remote, objectifying state and in the name of both Indian and British "society" obtained, which in turn relied on the logic of colonial difference.

My argument unfolds in several steps. I first spell out the status of my explanation with reference to recent scholarship on the sociology of empires and imperialism and as a species of "historical meta-ethics" and organizational sociology. Next, I outline my substantive explanation, emphasizing the role of mobilizing appeals and justifications across social boundaries as the key elements shaping the moral

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worldviews of administrators. In the remainder of the article, I first briefly describe the "macro" aspects of the English East India Trading Company's transition and the changing composition of the audience to its affairs from the 18th to 19th centuries, then delve into both stylized fictional and purportedly realistic accounts of officials' moral groundings to demonstrate the shift from contextual to abstract moral reasoning.

What Am I Trying to Explain?

There has been a recent, salutary efflorescence of work in historical sociology on empires and imperial administration [Steinmetz 2014], or the attempt to extend networks of agency—Julian Go [2000] has called them "chains of empire"—across geographical and social distances. Between the "early modern" (roughly from the 15th century to the end of the 18th) and "modern" (from the 19th century to the present) eras, the organization of these chains of empire varied drastically. To put the distinction crudely, in the early-modern world, empires tended to be organized in patrimonial networks extending from the emperor him- or herself down through nominal chains of fidelity—which, as the era wore on, were increasingly recognized through legal apparatuses such as royal charters and warrants [Adams 1996; 2007]. The end result of these chains was a remarkable variation in policy and governance in imperial domains. As Karen Barkey describes the early-modern Ottoman empire builders,

> As they brokered across cultures and social formations, they constructed a political form that combined centralism and regionalism, eclectic structures, and fixity and elasticity of boundaries, together with the incorporation and toleration of diversity, dissent, and, even when necessary, a certain defiance of the societal order [Barkey 2008: 29].

By the 19th century, however, the way empires were organized and ruled changed dramatically. As George Steinmetz describes imperial "native policy" in his *Devil's Handwriting*,

> The overarching goal of native policy…was to arrest the mobility of the colonized within this slippery cultural space [where colonizers met colonized populations], to put an end to the maddening oscillation between local and European signifying systems. Native policy was an attempt to identify a uniform cultural essence beneath the shimmering surface of indigenous practice and to restrict the colonized to this unitary identity. Native policy can thus be defined as any official intervention directed toward stabilizing

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a colonized group around a particular definition of its culture, character, and behavior [Steinmetz 2007: 43].

This modern organization of colonial rule—what Chatterjee has termed the "rule of colonial difference" and believes encompasses *all* modern governance—is predicated not only on the differentiation of colonized from colonized, but also the attribution of fixed properties ("a uniform cultural essence"). This process of fixing cultural systems and attempting to control the terms of their signification led, Timothy Mitchell has argued, to an apparatus of colonial representation that at once stereotyped colonized people as objects to be represented and also colonizing people as disinterested, "objective" observers [Mitchell 1988: 21-28].

What explains the transition between these two massively different systems of colonial organization? A general answer is outside of the scope of this article, but below I suggest one answer that fits the case of the English East India Trading Company (which I hereafter refer to as "the EIC" or the "Company"). The EIC began in 1600 as an outright commercial concern, transitioned by the 18th century into a "company state" [Stern 2011] mixing sovereignty with commerce, and was formally incorporated into the British Raj in the middle of the 19th century. The EIC's formal incorporation into the British imperial state came after the EIC became territorial suzerain to most of modern South Asia, had its commercial functions abolished in the early 19th century, and experienced the rebellion of much of its indigenous military forces in the so-called "Sepoy Rebellion."[1]

As I will suggest below, a key thread of this complicated history is how the Company's affairs were involved in and viewed by authorities and the general public in Britain. But before tracing out that more specific thread and suggesting how it relates to the transition from a contextualist, flexible, and particular mode of imperial administration to an objectifying, abstract, and essentializing one, it is first important to clarify the theoretical terms at stake. Therefore, before returning to the EIC's historical transition, I first clarify my position below on the historical sociology of morality and specify my theory of the transition from contextualist to universalist, abstract moral claims.

[1] For the earlier period of the Company's history, see Stern 2011 and Erikson 2014. For overviews of its complex middle period, see Bayly 1990, Marshall 2005, Stokes 1989, Wilson 2007, and J. E. Wilson 2011. For the transition to the British Raj and the sepoy rebellion, see Metcalf 1994, 2015 and Stokes 1986.

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Historical Meta-Ethics

To think about the transition between contextualist and abstract, disembedded moral situations as an empirical watershed, rather than a theoretical development or paradigmatic choice, is itself to take a position on the nature of morality and its relationship to social action. In this section, I first outline my position, which I call "historical meta-ethics." I next describe how this position links recent syntheses of organizational dynamics with the "strong evaluations" actors undertake, and I emphasize how such evaluations are grounded in agents' identities.

The "new" sociology of morality has been split between two lines of research. The first line has been oriented towards unwinding the relationship between moral commitments—whether conceptualized as moral attitudes or intrinsic emotions or reactions—and behavior. As Hitlin and Vaisey have put the point, "[r]egardless of one's particular position on the proper role of biology and cognition in the study of morality, the fact is that—rightly or wrongly—this is where much of the recent action is" [Hitlin and Vaisey 2010: 7]. But as Hitlin and Vaisey are just as quick to emphasize [*ibid*.: 5; 8-11], moral regimes—the sets of norms, styles of moral reasoning, and judgments that people make—themselves show tremendous variation. Thus a second line of research has complemented the first, emphasizing how particular moral regimes enable, potentiate, and constitute particular outlooks, institutions, and logics of understanding and acting in the social and material world [Abend 2014; Fourcade and Healy 2017; Tavory 2011]. Put differently, the first line of work in the new sociology of morality concentrates on "forcing" styles of efficient causation; the latter focuses on "forming," constitutive causes [Hirschman and Reed 2014].

My approach falls in this latter line of research, and is akin to Hacking's description work on the history of science:

> [Scholars in this line of work] do not do epistemology. They do not propose, advocate, or refute theories of knowledge. They study epistemological concepts as objects that evolve and mutate. Their work would be more truly named were it called "historical meta-epistemology" […] the historical meta-epistemologist examines the trajectories of the objects that play certain roles in thinking about knowledge and belief [Hacking 2004: 9].

I have in mind a similar set of questions for moral judgments and modes of understanding the world. This form of "historical

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meta-ethics" asks how morality—whether rooted in a particular community's gaze or derived from impersonal, objectified objects similar to material reality—intersects with other aspects of the material world.

One of the most comprehensive recent works on this topic is Gabriel Abend's *The Moral Background* [2014]. The book is a study in historical meta-ethics in business, and develops the eponymous concept in order to represent the conditions of possibility for what Abend calls "first-order" (i.e., concrete and particular) moral judgments. The moral background is complex, comprising the (1) grounding, (2) conceptual repertories, and (3) objects of evaluation of particular moral judgments, while also extending to (4) the method of ethical arguments, (5) meta-ethical assumptions, and even (6) metaphysical presuppositions of particular stances.

In this article, I would like to emphasize two points and show how they link together subsidiary elements of the moral background. The first is the organization of social relations. The recent "relational" thread of organizational sociology [Emirbayer 1997] has emphasized that different social spaces are organized and stratified according to different logics of evaluation [Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Fligstein and McAdam 2012] which, in complex societies, are in turn embedded in "linked ecologies" of such spaces [Abbott 2005]. The moral background is thus an aspect of status struggles in these spaces. As fields grow more or less contentious, likewise, the moral background can be deployed explicitly as a stated ideological position in a space, or it can work as a taken-for-granted set of assumptions about the moral significance of particular activities. (Bourdieu would call these two states a "classification struggle" within a field or a relatively widespread acceptance of one moral background as "doxa".) Put somewhat differently, it is important to recognize that a moral background often emerges and stands in relation to other competitors and, when explicit, functions like Robert Wuthnow's concept of a "moral order": "definitions of the manner in which social relations should be constructed" [1987: 145].

How, then, do moral backgrounds work in such classification struggles? Organizational scholars have emphasized that various classifications are successful because of the capabilities of particular actors to be persuasive.[2] While such factors are no doubt important, rendering a judgment from a particular moral background has another

[2] This is sometimes called "social skill" [e.g., Fligstein 2001] or, as it is by Bourdieu, the potential embedded in habitus as endowed by specific forms of capital.

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critical consequence: it entails, as Abend notes, *being* a particular kind of person. This is because moral judgments are fundamentally kinds of "strong evaluations," distinctions that fundamentally invoke questions of not just what a given person wants, but how the judgments one makes reflect on what kind of person one *is* [Taylor 1985]. In the context of the organizational politics noted above, these kinds of identifications in terms of a particular moral background are not neutral. Rather, being classified in terms of one or another leads to powerful "looping effects" that help shape one's sense of identity [Hacking 2004: Ch. 6]; making claims on the basis of one or another means selecting alternative definitions of a situation on the basis of potentially-conflicting bases of legitimacy [Shapin 1994: 21].

To summarize this section, my standpoint is historical meta-ethics, which takes no stand on ultimate moral truths but rather seeks to explain transitions between different moral backgrounds of particular judgments. To do this, I use Abend's concept of the moral background, but extend it to emphasize organizational politics and how claims-making in terms of a particular background is also a claim to being a certain kind (credible) of person. In terms of Abend's original six facets of the moral background, my approach thus seeks to explain how calls to ground moral explanations (facet 1) lead people to draw on conceptual logics and repertories (facet 2) rooted in changing objects of evaluation (facet 3), which imply different meta-ethical positions (facet 5).

Disruption, Justification, and Distance

How does the moral background transform from contextualism and particularity to abstract universality, especially in the case of imperial officials? In this section, I outline one explanation rooted in organizational conflict, mobilizing justifications, and the role of social and physical distance.

To start such an explanation, it is useful to recognize that expanding social systems typically experience ideological disruption, which in turn stem from the disruption of "moral obligations" binding together networks of agency [Wuthnow 1987: 154ff]. Such disrupted moral obligations engender multiple ideological responses, whose champions seek to institutionalize them [Berger and Luckmann 1967]. The boundaries over this ideological conflict, however, are rarely fixed, and parties to the conflict seek to incorporate allies and

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expand its boundaries in a process that Schattschneider has dubbed the "mobilization of bias" [1975].

The content of mobilizing appeals to outsiders of a conflict have a characteristic form: they are attempts to justify one's own action and disparage that of one's opponent [Boltanski and Thévenot 2006: 33ff]. Yet from the standpoint of mobilization *across* a series of linked ecologies, with very different internal logics and details of meaningful social action, the composition of the audience to these appeals becomes crucial [Jasper 1999: 269-292]. Crudely, these appeals may be either embedded in or disembedded from the details of local conflict from which they stem along two axes: the extent to which the observers are asked to identify concretely with the parties to the conflict or to take them as abstract actors subject to universal moral norms [Boltanski 1999; Ricœur 1995; Schutz 1967]; and whether the appeals are in particular, contextual social relations or phrased as abstract functions of social roles [Breiger 1974; Martin 2009]. Combining these two axes, four combinations are thus possible [See Table 1].

Under *patrimonalism* [Adams 2007], moral claims remain phrased in terms of concrete relationships to familial structures, even as this moral reference becomes increasingly symbolic as the actual social relations of agency stretch beyond the possibility of actually-existing, particular ties [Bourdieu 2004]. When disembedded moral claims collide with embedded social relations, meanwhile, the resulting moral background is that of (modern) *corruption* [e.g., Gupta 1995; Harrison 1999]. *Contextualism* and *universalism*, meanwhile, resemble Polanyi's alternative for how markets may or may not be "embedded" in social relations; as he argues, a key aspect of the process of the market's disembedding from surrounding social relations was the decontextualization of economic transactions from particular social relations and their subjection to a universalistic "law of the market" which itself carried the weight of moral obligation [1944: 116-135].

TABLE 1
Forms of Moral Appeal

		Relations	
		Embedded	***Disembedded***
Claims	*Embedded*	Contextualism	Patrimonialism
	Disembedded	Corruption	Universalism

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The Disembedding of the East India Company

The transition of the claims based in imperial administration's "moral background" from a contextualist to a universalist mode, as I have suggested above, is likely to involve the disembedding of both the social relationships that bound imperial officials to one another and to their superiors, and also of the metropolitan audience to their affairs. As I outline in this section, the history of the EIC from in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries demonstrates exactly these processes of disembedding.[3]

During the 17th century and into the 18th, the EIC was deeply embedded in both Mughal and British politics. Its affairs were often contentious, such as when two competing companies were chartered in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 or when Josiah Child launched military campaigns against (and was bitterly defeated by) the Mughals at the end of the 17th century [Stern 2011]. Yet especially compared with what followed, these affairs drew little attention in Britain itself from a general public that was indeed aware of its Empire [Wilson 1995], even as the Company's finances and patronage networks grew increasingly intertwined with the British elite and state [Sherman 1976; Sutherland 1952].

The Company's affairs, though, were thrown into public scrutiny in the aftermath of the Seven Years War (1756-1763). In India, the War accelerated the militarization of Company affairs and transformed it into (even more of) a state-like entity vying for valuable commercial advantages amid the breakdown of the Mughal Empire. Following military victories over a coalition of indigenous forces, the Company was awarded vassalage to the Mughal emperor in 1765 and, with it, the rights to the territorial revenues of (and commercial control over) the province of Bengal [Marshall 1987].

The promised windfall from the Company's acquisition of Bengal (and further territory as the EIC expanded in Madras, and to a lesser extent, Bombay) was extraordinarily contentious in Britain for the remainder of the 18th century. An insurgent faction of EIC shareholders, indifferent to the long-term costs of maintaining the Company's acquisitions, clashed repeatedly with the more cautious Board of Directors in the 1760s [Leonard 2014]. Worries over decaying EIC finances, in turn, threatened to destabilize the British state's finances

[3] I have examined these disembedding processes in greater detail in Wilson 2015 and 2016.

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(because it held the Company's debt, and vice versa) and politics (because many EIC stockholders were also members of Parliament) [Bowen 1991; 2006]. As the 18th century wore on, this instability was compounded by accusations of mismanagement and "despotic" government by the Company in India, which culminated in the scandalous trial, and acquittal after seven years, of the Governor-General of Bengal, Warren Hastings [Dirks 2009; Marshall 1965; 1981]. These affairs all drew the attention of a reading public that knew little about India, a country that very few had visited; according to Pickett's *Bibliography* [2011] of publications concerning the East India Company, in 1756, at the outbreak of the Seven Years War, only a single work was published in Britain concerning EIC affairs. In 1773, just after a major parliamentary Act began to directly regulate Company governance and commerce in India, there were 110 such works in existence.

The Company's changing position in Britain led to reforms in how it recruited and oversaw its officials in India. Before the Company's territorial expansion, officials largely drawn from merchant families oversaw small warehouses ("factories") on negotiated leases from local rulers, living in small settlements under the commercial and moral supervision of immediate superiors [Dodwell 1920; 1926; Spear 1963]. Merchants were drawn to service by the promise that they could trade on their own accounts, so long as they did not violate the EIC monopoly on European shipping [Erikson 2014]. This "country trade" could prove lucrative, but also periodically led to contentious factional conflict within the factories, as different groups of Company merchants vied with one another for commercial advantages in alliance with Indian middle-men [Hejeebu 2005; Neild-Basu 1984]. As the Company won territorial rights and the ability to regulate commerce, however, the "country trade" was lucrative enough to vault officials into the ranks of the minor aristocracy in Britain [Marshall 1976]. Indeed, even as their membership excoriated the returning "nabobs" [Lawson and Phillips 1984; Lenman and Lawson 1983], it became increasingly common for upwardly-aspiring families to have members spread across the growing British empire, with one or more members in India [McLaren 2001; Rothschild 2011].

As the stakes of an East-Indian career rose both for the officials themselves and for the Company's success as a commercial concern and government, the characteristics of officials and their training began to transform at the turn of the 19th century [Cohn 1987; Ghosh 1970; Marshall 1997]. The governors of the Company's provinces began to

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be appointed by a supervisory Board of Control in London, and ceased to be appointed from within the Company according to strict seniority. And while until the early part of the 19th century the attitudes of EIC officials tended to oscillate between views of Indian society itself as either similar to the British or different in a way deserving of respect and engagement [Bowen 1955; Dodwell 1926; Spear 1963; N. H. Wilson 2011], by the middle of the 19th century (and especially in light of the sepoy rebellion) attitudes had hardened to a recognizably modern imperial condescension and disengagement from Indian society [Dewey 1993; Metcalf 1994]. Finally, in the 1850s the EIC decisively reformed its recruitment practices, replacing recruitment by recommendation and patronage, which rewarded connection to Company Directors [Bourne 1977], with a system of competitive examinations favoring those with elite educations [Compton 1968; Dewey 1973; Moore 1964].

Taken together, the EIC's history over nearly a century demonstrates an increasingly disembedded structure. It began, in the 17th century, as a commercial concern that was deeply interwoven into elite social relationships both in India and Britain. Yet as it violently transformed into a territorial power, these relations were strained to the breaking point and increasingly thrown under the gaze of an audience with little knowledge of their history or dynamics. This led to changes in the background and training of Company officials, even as affairs in India continued to be the subject of metropolitan scrutiny.

What remains to be seen, however, is how these changes involved the moral backgrounds of administrative claims-making before, during, and after this transition. The remainder of the article, therefore, provides three examples from each of these moments to illustrate this transition. Although they differ in important ways, each of the illustrations below is an effort to clarify affairs in India for a metropolitan audience and to describe the moral character of official life.

Phase 1: Embedded Relations and Claims-Making

The first illustration of the moral background of administrative claims-making is John Braddyll's *Vindication,* published in 1746 as an open letter to the Court of Directors [Braddyll 1746]. The *Vindication* sought to clear Braddyll's name from the aspersions cast by Henry Lowther, the chief factor at Surat whom Braddyll had dismissed from his post for corruption. It is remarkable for its time, first, because it

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was published at all, since this sort of direct, and public, appeal became far more common after the 1760s. But the text is also unusual for how clearly it expressed both embedded moral claims-making and the embedded nature of social relationships within the Company's trading posts along the Indian coast.[4]

In his defense—complete, as was common 18th century pamphleteering practice, with appendices reproducing correspondence and official reports—against Lowther's corruption accusations, Braddyll sought above all to rebut what he called Lowther's "serious objection to my moral character" [5]. Braddyll dismissed outright as "a curious anecdote" Lowther's accusation that he had plotted to assassinate a previous governor (!), but went on more specifically to rebut another charge:

> But where he taxes [i.e., accuses] me with being recalled by the Governor and Council of *Bombay*, from the Chiefship of *Tellicherry,* for the disagreement with the rest of my fellow-servants, and pusillanimity, I shall in brief remark, that his celebrated Friend and Patron Mr. *Cowan* [probably Sir Robert Cowan, Governor of Bombay from 1729-1734] had resolved my remove, purely because I was not as ductile and pliant, as fond of being his dupe and money-cully, as this worth Gentleman. This was the true reason of my recal [sic]. For as to my pretended disagreement with my fellow-servants, Mr. *Cowan,* who never scrupled what disorders he occasion'd in the Service, so they promoted his private ends, or satisfy'd his private passions, had underhand stirred up, and encouraged my inferiors in the Factory, to breaches of discipline and subordination, which I never would suffer in any Post committed to my charge; and which they, it seems, depended on being supported in by the Governor, as they accordingly were [p. 5; emphases original].

Cowan was not the only Governor of Bombay against whom Braddyll had to defend himself. Part of Lowther's complaint relied on the testimony of the superior of both men, John Horne (who served as Governor from 1734 to 1739). In response to Horne's apparent questioning of Braddyll's "veracity," Braddyll noted that:

> As to the other personal points, especially where (Lowther) quotes Mr. *Horne* for his Author, I can only say, that Mr. *Horne*, as he well may, stedfastly [sic]

[4] In two respects, the text is also *un*remarkable for its time. First, like several of the vindications and apologies that would come towards the end of the 18th century [Brewer 1976], the actual "vindication" itself is quite short, and the bulk of the text is taken up by appendices reprinting correspondence, council minutes, and various testimonials from participants. Second, as in other Company affairs of the time (but very *un*like what would happen as the 18th century continued), there was comparatively little distinction made between British servants of the Company and Indian elites. Braddyll, for example, notes that the investigation into Lowther's wrongdoing was "corroborated too by the declaration of the Broker *Jaggernaut Lolldass* [sic]" [p. 7] without any question of his veracity. The testimony of an Indian person contained in the appendix—one "Bomanjee Rustumjee"—about corrupt dealings on the Bombay council is disputed, but only in tone, with the Company official in question reporting that he only "jestingly" discussed corruption with Bomanjee [188-190].

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denies his ever having made use of those false and scandalous expressions attributed to him, relating to my want of veracity, to "my being a dangerous man, and one that no one could safely associate with."—I hope, and believe, Mr. *Horne* was neither weak nor wicked enough to propagate a *character* of me so inconsistent with the important Trust he actually reposed in me; and indeed such abuse carries with it more of the *Lowther*-stamp than that of a very civil Gentleman, which whom I had never any dissention, nor to whom I ever gave the least reason to traduce me in so cruel and unjust a light; neither, admitting that Mr. *Horne* spoke thus injuriously of me, will I allow that my character is to stand or fall by what Mr. *Lowther*, or he either, says of it. That the enemies to the Company, with whom I never would associate, have along found me dangerous to them, and that the innocent Friends, with whom only I chose to associate, have never experienced any injury from this "*well known talent of mine for being romanticly* [sic] *historical*," or from any part of my private conduct, is a justice, I presume, they will not refuse me, and for which I fairly appeal to them, and, above all, to matter [sic] of Fact [pp. 3-4; emphases original].

Braddyll's defense of his own character, then, was still deeply embedded in a network of concrete and specific relations in Bombay and Surat. Reports of his "moral character" reflected his capacity to be an effective agent for the Court of Directors, and to establish that credibility, he had to use reports of superiors that could be ambiguous or even shift outright. To this, of course, he had recourse to "matter of Fact," but only *after* appealing to his association with "innocent friends."

This contextual style of moral reasoning had powerful influences on the content of judgments made in India, Braddyll explained. The core of his *Vindication* recounts his commission to investigate and suspend Lowther from his post as Chief factor at Bombay's subsidiary station in Surat. When Braddyll arrived in Surat with his commission from the Governor of Bombay, however, Lowther fled to the local "Moorish" factory and refused to return. As he attempted to establish a regular council with the remaining Company servants and investigate Lowther's malfeasance, however, Braddyll discovered that most of the council had been "effectually seduced from their duty and fidelity to your Honours, (and) that they acted in all respects more like *Lowther's* Champions, than like YOUR Servants" [p. 13; emphasis and capitalization original].

Braddyll quickly clashed with the most senior remaining servant and banished him to Bombay for insubordination. Two more junior members of the council next resigned in protest, and while Lowther later accused Braddyll of dangling the carrot of reinstatement before them in exchange for condemning Lowther, Braddyll justified his

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leniency through the importance of contextual moral judgment. As he wrote:

> That they had no right to protest against a step to which their assent was not so much as ask'd, and taken entirely upon myself, in virtue of the commission I acted by, is, I presume, a little too plain for even Mr. *Lowther* to deny. However, as they were young Gentlemen, otherwise of fair characters, and whom I have *since so plentifully loaded with* (positively no other) *calumny and slander*, than imputing their seduction from their Duty to Mr. *Lowther's* practices and ascendant over them; I compassionated [sic] extremely with their misguidance, and would, with great pleasure, have seen them retract a step which clenched their (N.B.) *self-dismission*, or rather *Desertion* of the Service: and the Proposal to them of re-instating them on the very *Proviso* so manifestly misconstrued by *Lowther*, was surely not the ridiculous reason he gives of our not caring that this Testimony against my *violent Proceedings*, should stand upon our Registers, but purely lenity [sic] and compassion for two Gentlemen, whom he had so perfectly misled, and whose breaches of duty, and order were reproaches to himself, and undeniable proofs of the *eighteenth* Article charging him with the seduction of his fellow-servants from their fidelity and subordination.
> Your Honours cannot but observe, with indignation, what an use is attempted to be made of our unwillingness to pursue any rigour, or to take advantages of the weakness and precipitancy of those two Gentlemen, and how far I was, in the execution of my Commission, from stretching it to ill-natured extremes; consequently, how little the *proceedings* I was *forced* into, to maintain the order and discipline of the Service, and, above all, for example sake, the respect due to YOUR authority, deserved the name *violent* [pp. 16-17; emphasis and capitalization original].

In other words, according to Braddyll, Lowther's influence as a Company superior was so strong that he could "seduce" two junior servants, corrupting their moral judgment. Yet, Braddyll hastens to add, even though his own leniency towards the two *might* be construed as corruption in its own right (namely, an effort to secure false testimony against Lowther and to disguise his "violent" treatment), in fact it was a judgment made in the particular situation of the particular social relations he found in Surat. In other words, Braddyll justified himself using moral claims and in light of social relations, both of which were embedded in local context.

Phase 2: Chaotic Relations and Claims-Making

If the first phase of the moral background of India officials was embedded in both the mode of its claims-making and the social relationships sustaining it, the second phase was

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characterized by a breakdown and chaotic ambiguity along both of these dimensions. Among the representations available to the British public of this transition,[5] one which best encapsulates this breakdown is *Tom Raw*, a satirical poem published in 1828 by an EIC official, Charles D'Oyly [D'Oyly and Ackermann 1828]. The fictional poem, illustrated by beautiful color illustrations of Anglo life in India [see Figure 1] and clearly written for an unfamiliar audience (each canto is annotated with explanations of Anglo-Indian pidgin vocabulary), recounts the career of a young cadet in the East India Company's army as he sails to India, experiences social life in Calcutta, makes his way to his eventual army post, fights in a battle, and eventually marries the daughter of his commanding officer.

A central theme of *Tom Raw* is the ambiguity of the moral background of the Anglo-Indians, especially the question of whether it should be rooted in local circumstances or in more abstract ground. In the verse preface to one of the cantos, for example, D'Oyly complains about British perceptions of Company officials in India:

> It's often struck us a curious thing,
> That England knows so little about India,
> Consid'ring we return, and, with us bring
> The wealth of Poona and the lacks of Scindia;
> Still speaking in our native tongue,—our Hindee, or
> Persian discarded quite, and—given the chatter:
> But Laplanders, their sledges, dogs, and rein-deer,
> Khaskatkans, or Americans, no matter,
> Are more known than your Hindoo, Muslim, or Mahratta
>
> We've heard it traced to envying and jealousies
> Of our rupees, and characters of Nabobs,
> Obtained by acts that richly merit gallowses.
> Our vulgar fondness for pillows and cabobs,
> Snatching the shawls and jewels, as the tray bobs
> Under our noses at a grand Durbar;
> In short, that every Indian every way robs.
> We've hear that folks often have gone so far,
> As to place 'gainst all Indian company a Bar!
> And yet with all this ignorance and scoffing,
> On Eastern things, they of the truth come short;
> For instance—there's a dutchess who went off, in
> An Indian coarse silk petticoat, to court,
> Which Khidmutgars a buckishism vote,

[5] Samuel Foote's *The Nabob* [1778] is one option, but it concentrates on a returned nabob's metropolitan activity (and missteps). George Paterson's diary [Nightingale 1985] also broadly corroborates the moral background portrayed in *Tom Raw*, but was not published during Paterson's lifetime [1734-1817].

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FIGURE 1

A Color Illustration Plate from Tom Raw

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And are seen strutting in, of grandeur plenary:
There's Ackermann, a bank of England note
Of some amount work give—the sinner he—
For twelve good drawings of our lovely Indian scenery.
[D'Oyly and Ackermann 1828: 90].

In this passage, D'Oyly defends against the condemnation of the British audience content to judge the "acts that richly merit gallowses" undertaken by Company officials. Yet the terms of this defense are themselves ambiguous. On the one hand, D'Oyly suggests a universalistic moral background, in the sense that both the British audience and Indian officials are equally subject to seduction and corruption by luxuries imported from India (from the dutchess in her petticoat to those seeking to buy artwork about India to "the lacks [large amounts of money] of Poona or the wealth of Scindia"). Yet, on the other hand, there is still a fundamental difference between Indian (and even Anglo-Indian) and British culture, even elsewhere in the imperial diaspora ("Laplanders… or Americans").

This ambiguity is reflected several times in *Tom Raw's* main narrative and, in each instance, the narrator mocks traditional embedded and contextual modes of moral stabilization. Thus, when *Tom Raw* arrives in Calcutta, he carries with him a series of patronage letters meant to embed him in favorable networks in Anglo-Indian society. But Raw's contact proves practically useless—refusing Raw further connection or a place to stay—after quizzing him on distant relations in Britain [33-35]. This Anglo-Indian official, whom Raw finds clouded with Hookah smoke in his office, is a symbol for decay:

There, seated, was a most cadav'rous figure,
With sallow visage, long and wrinkley too,
A large hooked nose, and twinkling eyes—no bigger
Than gooseberries, with just their greenish hue;
His spindle shanks were twined with treble screw;
And the think hoary honours of his head
Fell long and lank, and scraped into a queue;
His clothes might o'er him and his wife have spread,
And shoes of red nankeen he wore—stitched with white thread.
[D'Oyly and Ackermann 1828: 32].

But if any character is singled out for excoriation in *Tom Raw*, it is "Churbee Doss," an Indian elite who "from his infancy/Had been 'mong Europeans, who had traded/And had acquired their taste" [100]. Doss represented an upward mobility possible for those who allied themselves to British officials as "banians" or "dubashes" [Neild-Basu 1984]—middle-men overseeing commercial affairs.

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However, while this role had been essential in the 18th century, by the 19th it had taken on a far less savory cast:

> To any family of wealth or pride.
> Forth issued in the world,—a hack sircar [head servant]
> Wrote passes at the Custom House, where hied [sic]
> Intriguers in abundance—on a Par,
> With them he cheated, stole, deceived, and—cleared the bar
>
> Of penury—then; at the Ghauts [hills] he plies
> For country Captains and tehri keen nipcheeses [goat cheese],
> Passes scot-free their secret merchandise,
> For a good bribe, which mutually pleases.
> Then, acting as an arutdar [financial agent] he eases
> His clients of their cash—the state, of duties,
> Lends Speculists some hundreds of rupees he's
> Accumulated, for he most acute is
> In interest usurious, which will nobly suit his
>
> End, and—then passing to a higher grade,
> He doffs his coarse habiliments for muslin,
> Lolls in his palkee,—talks of ships and trade,
> Buys large investments—thrusts his ugly muzzle in
> Th' Exchange Rooms, and commences ampler guzzling,
> Drinks ghee [clarified butter], which smells him for a bag of bones
> To blubber cheeks and paunch enormous—puzzling
> To all but those who know much men's zones
> May be expanded by the bhyn's [cattle's] buttery loans.
> [D'Oyly and Ackermann 1828: 100-101].

However offensive a portrait may be drawn of Doss in *Tom Raw*, the most remarkable passage from the standpoint of the moral background of administration comes when Raw meets another elite Indian, this time the Nawab (or indigenous governor) of Bengal, in audience with the British resident, or political supervisor. When the Nawab seeks to embrace Raw, "To give him—par usage—th' embrace fraternal" [p. 205], he is disgusted, shouting in front of the Court

> "I hug the filthy fellow?—no, not I",
> Cried Tom—"I think it—hang me—a disgrace;
> "And if he says another word on 't,—by
> "The Lord!—I'll spit in the black rascal's face!"
> "Hush! hush!" Said Mr. B., "regard the place
> "And consequence of doing foolish things."
> "Nay" —murmured Tom—"I am not of a race
> "That will be slobbered o'er by native kings,
> "Despite his cloth of gold and all his sparkling rings."
> [D'Oyly and Ackermann 1828: 206].

Thus, in *Tom Raw,* there is an evident ambiguity in the moral background of official behavior. Should it be contextual, reflecting

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"the place" and local ties to both Anglo-Indian society and Indian elites? Or should it reflect a more universal grounding in the potential seduction of luxury (that could affect Britons, Anglo-Indians, and Indian elites equally) and in racial distinctions between "black rascals" and Company servants? By at once narratively portraying Raw's outrage against an established elite network that includes both Anglo-Indians and Indians, by portraying his disembedded (racist) moral claims to difference as violations of local norms recognized by *both* Indians and Anglo-Indian officials, and by itself reiterating the cultural gulf separating Britain and India even as it seeks to portray a universal moral seduction of luxury, *Tom Raw* never provides a clear answer.

Phase 3: Disembedded Relations and Claims-Making

If Braddyll's V*indication* presented a moral background that was unambiguously embedded in local social relations and made embedded moral claims, and *Tom Raw* presented an ambiguous picture that struggled with the disembedding of both dimensions, the final illustration presents an unambiguously disembedded style of claims-making and social relations among Anglo-Indian officials. *The Competition Wallah* was published in 1864, as the Company was being unwound and folded into the larger British Empire in the aftermath of the sepoy rebellion of 1857 [Trevelyan 1864]. The rebellion coincided with major reforms to the EIC's civil service, and especially the introduction of competitive exams. The author of the *Competition Wallah*, George Trevelyan, thus presents the work as the fictionalized correspondence between two Cambridge school friends—Henry Broughton, who joins the Company's service as a junior official, and Charles Simpkins, who remains in England.

The bulk of *The Competition Wallah* is taken up with wry observations about Anglo-Indian and Indian social, economic, and religious life. But, from the standpoint of the changing moral background of imperial administration, two passages are key. First, the narrator, Broughton, presents a long description of the moral posture of Company servants:

> Any one who wishes to preserve a high tone of thought, and a mind constantly open to new impressions, must look for a calling which is an education in itself—that is, a calling which presents a succession of generous and elevating interests. And such is pre-eminently the career of a civil servant in India…

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> there is no career which so surely inspires men with the desire to do something useful, in their generation—leave their mark upon the world for good, and not for evil. The public spirit among the servants of the Government at home is faint compared with the fire and zeal which glows in every vein of an Indian official… It is a rare phenomenon this of a race of statesmen and judges scattered throughout a conquered land, ruling it, not with an eye to private profit, but even in the selfish interests of the mother country, but in single-minded solicitude for the happiness and improvement of the children of the soil.
> Whence comes this high standard of efficiency and public virtue among men taken at random, and then exposed to the temptations of unbounded power and unlimited facilities for illicit gain? It cannot be peculiarly the result of Haileybury [the training facility for EIC servants], for that institution, from its very nature, united the worst faults of school and college. The read education of a civil servant consists in the responsibility that devolves on him at an early age, which brings out whatever good there is in a man; the obligation to do nothing that can reflect dishonour on the service; the varied and attractive character of his duties; and the example of precept of his superiors, who regard him rather as a younger brother than as a subordinate official [Trevelyan 1864: 147-150].

Beyond the final collegial reference to fraternity among officials, Treveylan's account of the moral life and motivation of Company officials is pitched in the register of moral universalism. People have inherent good within them, and the early, enormous responsibility of service coupled with the "obligation to do nothing that can reflect dishonour on the service" brings out "whatever good there is in a man," whoever he may be.

While the civil service was cast in selfless terms, Trevelyan established a strong contrast with elite Indian society. Broughton is invited to a tumasha (a ball or entertainment) by a local zemindar (or Indian elite landowner). The tumasha itself is portrayed as boring and bizarrely wasteful, but as Trevelyan notes,

> The motive for this profusion is evident enough. All the world within a hundred miles will hear that the Futtehgung man has induced the sahibs (Anglo-Indians) of Moffussilpore to be present at a tumasha; and the Rajah of Doodiah[6], his dearest enemy, will not know a moment's peace until he has achieved the same honour. Under the feeble rule of the Mogul, these great landholders exercised an absolute authority within their own borders, and made war upon each other with considerably gusto. Since we have been in the country they have been forced to confine their rivalry to quarrels concerning precedence, and endless litigation about every imaginable subject [Trevelyan 1864: 130].

Thus, the moral background of modern imperialism in India allowed officials to separate themselves from local entanglements

[6] These proper names are fictional. "Moffussilpore," for example, means roughly "anywhere in the hinterland."

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and make moral claims to govern in the name of downtrodden Indian subjects. This allowed them to universalize their moral claims. After all, according to Trevelyan, the spirit of public service, rather than a particular personal interest, called one to service in India. Yet universalizing moral claims also depended on decisively severing social relations from Indian society; embedded social relations seemed to be a space of rivalry, political entanglements, and corruption, and they were therefore confined to neutered, elite Indians from whom everyday Indian subjects needed to be protected by Anglo-Indian officials. Put differently, it was a recognizably modern apparatus of colonial administration, dependent on an essentializing, objectifying differentiation of ruler and subject.

Conclusion

This article suggested three interrelated lines of explanation to shed light on the opening contrast between Smith's contextualist and Peirce's universalistic explanations of how moral understandings stabilize social order. First, I have suggested that, from the standpoint of historical sociology, their contrasting viewpoints are empirical differences in meta-ethical moral backgrounds. Second, I have also suggested that the transition between these different empirical positions is deeply involved in the transition from early-modern to modern styles of imperial administration. Finally, I have suggested that this transition, in turn, was shaped by the way that organizational conflict within imperial administrations was embedded in wider networks of observers.

Several qualifications of this argument are in order. The evidence used to demonstrate the shift between contextualist and universal moral backgrounds, of course, only scratches the surface of the organizational politics at stake and the nuance and variations of the backgrounds themselves. Likewise, I have said comparatively little about how changing moral backgrounds involved changing understandings of what it meant to possess a moral career that could translate across metropolitan and colonial settings. It is also crucial to recognize, finally, that the explanation offered here is likely only one of many, and that there are probably many possible avenues to disembedded, universalistic moral backgrounds. Even given these

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limitations, however, this article has hopefully helped to show a useful path forward for the historical sociology of morality.

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Résumé

Cet article étudie le rôle de la perception publique du conflit moral pour la transition entre les organisations impériales de type pré-moderne et moderne, en particulier du point de vue des approches administratives et des logiques institutionnelles mobilisées pour les gouverner. Les premières organisations impériales modernes étaient profondément patrimoniales et s'appuyaient sur un style « implanté » (*embedded*) de raisonnement moral qui contribuait à éloigner et segmenter leurs affaires courantes des métropoles. À l'opposé, les empires modernes ordonnent ce qu'ils gouvernent dans des hiérarchies théoriquement objectives et sur la base de critères qui semblent universels. À l'aide d'une étude de cas consacrée à la crise et à la transformation de l'empire britannique au tournant du XIXe siècle, cet article montre que l'émergence de l'administration impériale moderne repose sur l'affaiblissement des réseaux de justification morale, qui constituaient l'échafaudage de l'empire patrimonial, face à un contrôle métropolitain de type « désintéressé ». Ce contrôle a contribué à créer une audience pour les conflits politiques et moraux entre les administrateurs impériaux, qui ont ensuite utilisé des revendications morales « désimplantées » (*disembedded*) pour mobiliser leur soutien.

Mots-clés : Moralité ; Empire ; Administration publique ; Formation de l'État.

Zusammenfassung

Beim Übergang von vormodern zu modern organisierten Weltreichen, und hier insbesondere in puncto Verwaltungsperspektiven und institutionelle Logik, um sie zu regieren, wurde die Frage, wie moralische Konflikte innerhalb der Reichsverbände einerseits und im Mutterland andererseits gesehen wurden, zum Angelpunkt. Neuzeitliche Imperien waren vermögensrechtlich aufgestellt und stützten sich auf eine moralisch verankerte Argumentation, die zu einer Trennung ihrer Angelegenheiten vom Mutterland führte. Ganz anders moderne Weltreiche, die ihre Regierungsstruktur hierarchisch gliedern, die rein formal betrachtet objektiv sind und deren Kriterien universell erscheinen. Aufbauend auf einer Fallstudie, die sich mit der Krise und Umwandlung des britischen Empires Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts auseinandersetzt, behauptet dieser Artikel, dass die Entstehung der modernen Kolonialreichsverwaltung auf die Zerrüttung der moralischen Rechtfertigungsnetze, das ursprüngliche Gerüst der frühen, vermögensrechtlich organisierten Weltreiche, zurückzuführen ist, die sich wiederum durch eine "desinteressierte" Überprüfung durch das Mutterland erklären lässt. Diese Überprüfung führte zu harten politischen und moralischen Konflikten zwischen imperialen Verwaltern, die schließlich durch "unverankerte" moralische Anforderungen Unterstützung zu erwirken suchten.

Schlüsselwörter : Moral; Imperium; Öffentliche Verwaltung; Staatsbildung.

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