

A Story About Values

This story took place in Assiros, Greece.

One evening, an old man came down the dirt road past the house, riding sidesaddle on a donkey, tapping the animal with a stick. Next to him was an old woman, on foot, bent under the weight of a bulging sack. As they passed, one of my fellow students greeted them in broken Greek.

“That was Mr. George,” our interpreter explained.

“What did you ask him?” one of us said.

“How he’s doing. And why his wife isn’t riding the donkey.”

There was a pause. *“And?”*

“He says she doesn’t have one.”

It was my first taste of the classic anthropological experience of culture shock. Back in Birmingham, a man who rode a donkey while his wife struggled with a huge sack would have seemed selfish (or worse).

Here in Assiros, however, the arrangement was clearly so natural, and the reasons for it so self-evident, that our question apparently struck Mr. George as simpleminded.

Values are functioning parts of larger wholes. Tearing them out of context, weighing them in an imaginary scale, and judging them does not get us any closer to designing a one-size-fits-all, perfect set of values, because values always exist only in the real world, as parts of actual social systems.

Our values are essentially connected to our capacity for evaluative or normative self-conception. The way in which they guide us is not merely by prodding us to satisfy them, like a desire, but by prodding us to live up to them: they determine not only what states of affairs we want to realize, but who we want ourselves to be.

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SOURCE: *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve* by Ian Morris; Copyright © 2015 by Ian Morris; Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ; pp. 1, 11.