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Tópico: 2

Formal and Informal Frameworks: How Beliefs Flow Through and Change Society

Introduction

Beliefs act as pillars for societies as in they provide guidance to its individuals, such as how one *should* - or is expected to - feel, think and act while living in that specific society. Over the course of humanity, many developments in science and thought have shaped our beliefs, and many core tenants, once thought to be indisputably true and supported by societal institutions, such as governments, have been discredited and swapped in favor of new beliefs that provide for better living as a whole.

A way to see if a belief is central to a certain society is to analyze the *formal frameworks* of such society and assess if they actively foster and incentivize a belief. However, even if the formal frameworks of a society don't support a belief, that is not to say that it is absent from the society at play, for while a belief may even be opposed by the formal frameworks of a society, it certainly can still flow and develop in the *informal frameworks* of the same society.

Before going any further, it is in the interest of this essay to define what frameworks, formal frameworks and informal frameworks are. We can define them as such:

Frameworks: Systems in which certain beliefs are maintained.

Formal frameworks: Constitutions and legislations, formal rules, ideas and beliefs imposed by formal entities that are expected to be followed by the people that live under a certain society.

Informal frameworks: Societal and informal interactions between the entities of a certain society, common notions that may or may not be specified in formal frameworks.

Acknowledging the existence of these frameworks and how beliefs flow between them is central to understanding the development of thought in societies. Therefore, in this essay, I will provide two examples of how beliefs may flow from one framework to another, and what meaningful insight we can gather from this.

First, I will present how racist and discriminatory beliefs that were once highly present in formal frameworks are still present in our current societies and how they can still affect people.

Secondly, I will present how thoughts that were primarily present in the informal frameworks of society can flow to and eventually be backed by formal frameworks using the belief of the accumulation of wealth incentivized by Protestantism and specially Calvinism as an example.

Before we begin, it's important to say that, while in this essay beliefs are presented as flowing from one framework to another, this is not to be mistaken as a false dichotomy, for beliefs are present in both formal and informal frameworks at the same time, what changes is the prominence of a belief in each framework. A certain belief may be primarily in one and then change to be relevant in both informal and formal frameworks, or it may be relevant in both and then change to be present in mostly one type of framework.

Development I: Formal to Informal - The Lingering of Discrimination

Discrimination present in formal frameworks can be dated back to the earliest civilizations known to man. While not so ancient, we will take ancient Greece as our first example for this instance. In ancient Greece, unlike modern society, political liberties were not so free. Slaves, for examples, were commonplace and thought to be a normal aspect of society, both in the formal frameworks of society, such as how the Greeks thought their politics should work, with slaves not being able to vote – of course this is slightly simplified as Greece still worked with city-states with their own laws and ideas – and in the informal frameworks of Greek society, for the citizens, as said earlier, saw the existence of slaves as mundane. Such affirmation can be validated with the ideas of one the most notorious Greek person of history, Aristotle, who thought that the ownership of slaves was ethically justified in Greek society and that was simply the best way for things to be. Jumping to more recent history, it was not long ago when, in the United States, black people were expected to sit on assigned parts of public transportation, or to use “colored bathrooms”. The John Crow laws are a great example of how ideas can be supported through formal frameworks in a society, since the own US legislation fostered racist and discriminatory beliefs in the society in which it acted upon.

Of course, these beliefs were not totally widespread, for in the informal frameworks of society, the civil rights movements gained traction and ultimately managed to abolish the formal frameworks that perpetuated racist and discriminatory beliefs. Nonetheless, that was certainly not the end, for even if the formal frameworks in which certain beliefs where abolished, they continued navigating and flowing through society in informal frameworks. To this day, even if racism is not constitutional in the U.S, black people still suffer structural and

discriminatory racism. No laws specify, but, statistically, it's much more likely for a black person to be found guilty of the same sentence than a white person, even if the conditions are the same for the two. Also, an alarming number of people still face problem trying to find jobs and occupations simply because of the color of their skin. It is then the duty of society to fight against such lingering discrimination both through formal and informal means, that is, with laws, legislation and through the action of individuals.

To summarize, while beliefs may lose the formal frameworks in which they were initially conceived of incentivized, they can still linger in our society, and this can be extremely problematic with discriminatory beliefs that were once formally backed by societal institutions. This also demonstrates how informal frameworks can be much more long lived than formal frameworks.

Development II: Informal to Formal – Calvinism and Capitalism

Much change in society – if not all – comes from beliefs stemming from informal frameworks being adopted by formal frameworks. This can be said about the example previously cited above, where beliefs of civic liberty originating in informal frameworks in the civil rights movement abolished discriminatory laws in the formal frameworks of US society. The same can be said about the focus of this development: the adoption of the accumulation of wealth as a core belief in society, being backed by formal frameworks.

It would be foolish to say that before Protestantism and Calvinism - the doctrine that prosperity through work is a sign of divine salvation - the common person was not interested in accumulating wealth, or that they thought that having monetary prosperity was something to be looked down upon, however the institutions of the time, mainly the Catholic Church and the absolutist kings simply did not allow for these beliefs to flourish and develop in society – of course, for they would risk having their centralized power diminished – immense production and land taxes and the little rights the population had insured that the great majority simply couldn't accumulate wealth reliably, that is, until Protestantism came about and set its roots in European society.

Not all looked at the ideas of Martin Luther and the following Protestants with glee, many absolutists created oppositions and killed several protestants over it. However, in the societies that did allow it, the formal frameworks finally let the ideas that lingered in the minds of many to run free by adopting them formally. Calvinism specially was one of the main causes for the rise of Capitalism and the accumulation of wealth, as was expressed in the works of sociologist Max Weber.

What we can gather from this is that, as beliefs go from primarily formal to informal frameworks, they can also go from informal to formal, or more specifically, be backed by formal frameworks. That is to say, the beliefs and ideas of the accumulation of wealth were present in society far before Calvinism was even conceived as a concept. What it did was not primarily create and place this thought in the minds of people – even though that certainly happened to an extent – what it did instead was simply allow for the formal frameworks of the societies that accepted it to enable such beliefs.

Conclusion

In this essay I have proposed and explained the idea of formal and informal frameworks, and, using historically relevant examples, illustrated how beliefs can flow between them, be it from informal to formal or vice-versa. This notion can help analyze the nature of the change, movement, and permanence of beliefs in our societies. Like how they can linger even after the formal frameworks in which they were first established have been abolished, or how beliefs stemming from informal frameworks can eventually establish themselves in formal frameworks.

These flows are central to the development of our societies, and understanding them is sure to bring many benefits to sociological and philosophical inquiry. Of course, the nature of the flow of beliefs between frameworks is extremely nuanced and requires extensive analysis in order to be understood in its totality. However, this essay hopefully provides productive insight into these ideas.

Societal thought is ever-changing, and many beliefs we have today are sure to change not too far ahead in the future. Because of this, the more we can analyze our societies and the way beliefs flow in them, the better we can assess if what we are doing and what we believe in is truly the best we can possibly provide to our societies, or if there is still room to change, adapt, and improve.

