

Westermarck, Edvard Alexander (1862–1939)

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Edvard Alexander Westermarck (1862–1939), Finnish philosopher, anthropologist, and sociologist, studied human marriage, the origin of moral ideas, and ethical relativity. He was appointed professor of moral philosophy in Helsinki in 1906 and professor of sociology at the London School of Economics the following year. His international reputation encouraged both Helsinki and Turku to form departments of sociology in 1926–27. Being an empiricist, Westermarck declared that the object of research was to explain social phenomena, to find their causes, and to show how and why they had come into existence. Over the years, Westermarck studied wedding ceremonies, conceptions of holiness, the evil eye, and evil spirits among the Berber tribes of central and northern Morocco. In London he became the tutor of Malinowski and in Finland he trained a group of young students and initiated field studies for them that contributed to the fields of anthropology, sociology, religion, and philosophy, especially in the 1910s and 1920s.

Westermarck was a man with a bright intellect and critical mind, well read in English, French, and German literature and outspoken, with strong anti-Czarist views. As a great humanist, he was not a social Darwinist, even though, as a member of the first generation of professional anthropologists, he was a stern evolutionist. From his first work and subsequently, Westermarck stressed the close relationship between nature and culture. It was the central idea in his studies of marriage and family life and in his works on religion, as well as in his philosophy of morality and emotions. His doctoral thesis (1891) was rewritten into his famous *The History of Human Marriage*. Rejecting the notion of early humans' promiscuity as expressed in the theories of

Bachofen, McLennan, and Morgan, Westermarck argued that the family, consisting of mother, father, and child, must have existed in the very earliest times of humankind. He classified empirical data related to marriage into categories such as monogamy, polygamy, group marriage, marriage by capture, and so on. From this classification he showed that similar social forms for marriage existed in the most varied social and cultural environments. The similarities could be explained in biological terms. He concluded that marriage as a universal social institution came with the human biological heritage, that is, the child's prolonged need of protection by mother and father. In addition to its critique of early humans' unregulated sexuality, his work also contained descriptions and analysis of marriage rules, concluding with a substantial section on the incest taboo. Westermarck's theory of the incest taboo, later referred to as the "Westermarck effect," suggested that the exogamic rules in many societies were not based on kinship, but rather on the closeness of people reared together as siblings in childhood.

Westermarck returned to the idea of biological constraints against sexual relations among persons who had grown up together in part two of *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas* (1908). Being very liberal for his time, Westermarck was one of the earliest writers to address same-sex relations, both preferential homosexual love and what he called "congenital inversion," that is, specific conditions such as lack of partners of the opposite sex. Living in Tangier for many years, traveling with male companions, and being a lifelong bachelor have lately made several scholars assume that he was gay himself. He may or may not have been a homosexual, but critically noted the excessive stigmatization and punishment of homosexuality by such religions as Judaism and Christianity. The relationship between this discussion and moral concepts is not fully clear, but is linked to his controversial claim that moral judgments are based on emotions, not intellectual rationality. That theme was

elaborated much later into a provocative philosophical work, *Ethical Relativity*. He traced the origin of morality in language, and tried to show that through biological evolution it had developed as a central position in human culture. It is not much use to say that a moral judgment is true or not true, Westermarck argued. In his view, the human being should be seeking a good life instead of concentrating on rules and duties.

SEE ALSO: Anthropology; Evolution and Sexology; Incest; Malinowski, Bronislaw (1884–1942)

FURTHER READINGS

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