



THIS VIEW OF LIFE

This View of Morality: Can an Evolutionary Perspective Reveal a Universal Morality?



*Darwin pondering the inner workings of the
Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil*

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Introduction

Is There a Universal Morality?

by David Sloan Wilson, Mark Sloan, & Michael Price

Our moral sense makes involuntary, near instantaneous judgements of good and evil about other's actions as well as our own. Integral to these involuntary judgements is the feeling that they are binding on all. Yet, when we look across cultures, moral codes are diverse, contradictory, and even (for outsiders) bizarre. Eating shrimp is a moral abomination? See Leviticus for this and many other entertainingly strange examples of enforced moral norms.

Observations like these have led some philosophers to argue that there is no universal morality and what is considered morally binding depends upon the society we live in⁴. Others have advocated versions of utilitarianism, Kantianism, virtue ethics, or theistic morality⁵, but no universal morality has become generally accepted.

Might this state of affairs be ready to be updated in light of results from science?

There is a growing consensus that the neurobiology underlying our moral sense and the moral norms of any given culture were genetically and culturally selected for the benefits of cooperation they produced^{1,2,7}. That is, behaviors motivated by our moral sense and enforced by cultural moral norms are elements of cooperation strategies, notably reciprocity

strategies, that solve social problems arising from unbridled selfinterest. Many of the contradictions and bizarreness of cultural moral norms can be explained by differences in who one ought to cooperate with³, who one can ignore or even exploit⁸, and markers of membership⁶ in these in-groups and out-groups (markers such as food and sex taboos, circumcision, hair and dress styles, sacred objects and ideas, and sacred authorities). No matter how flawed and contradictory, our morally sanctioned behaviors have been adequate to make us the incredibly successful social species we are. Might recognition and conscious application of a universal morality at the heart of these cooperation strategies bring even greater benefits?

There are at least two categories of possible moral universals.

The first is a moral universal that prescribes what everyone 'ought' to do across all cultures, a morality that is universally binding. This is a common understanding of "moral universal" in philosophy.

The second is what all moral systems can be shown to have in common as cooperation strategies (what is common to all cooperation strategies relevant to morality), without these empirical universals being somehow innately binding. A society

might advocate for and enforce such a moral universal as best for meeting their shared needs and preferences.

TVOL is pleased to explore the question "Is there a universal morality?" with the help of philosophers and scientists at the forefront of studying morality in light of "this view of life". We begin with collected short

commentaries to sketch a large canvas, which will then be filled in with in-depth articles and interviews.

The writing assignment for each commentator was "Is there anything that can be said to be universally moral, either descriptively or normatively? Why should the average person care about your answer?"

Further reading:

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Overview of Responses

by Michael Price, Mark Sloan, David Sloan Wilson

Our fifteen essayists provided a surprising diversity of answers to the question “Is there a universal morality?” Such diversity of opinion on such a culturally important issue suggests that this is a productive topic for discussion.

We’ve categorized all essays into three broad response categories: “Maybe”, “No”, and “Yes”. This structure presents some risk of oversimplification, but also provides useful guidance about the general tone of essays, which we thought justified the risk.

It would be easy to talk about how essays disagreed, but focusing on potential commonalities may be more productive.

Consider important questions such as “What is morality’s function, and what is its ultimate goal?” and “What behaviors are immoral, and who deserves equal moral regard?” Participants were not asked these questions directly, but most touched on them in passing in responding to “Is there a universal morality?”

Regardless of whether responses fell in the “Maybe”, “No”, or “Yes” categories, there was considerable space for agreement. Specifically, many essayists seemed to agree that morality’s function is to increase the benefits of living in cooperative societies; that morality’s ultimate goal is increased well-being or flourishing; that exploitation or “harm” (that decreases the benefits of living in cooperative societies) is

immoral; and that everyone deserves equal moral regard.

Putting aside the question of whether such conclusions are better-justified by science or by moral philosophy, a consensus in support of them could have important cultural implications. These conclusions imply, for example, that morality is best understood not so much as a burden but as guidance for living a good life. And common moral norms such as the Golden Rule, and rules against theft, killing, and lying, are not moral absolutes but heuristics (usually reliable, but fallible, rules of thumb) for increasing the benefits of living in cooperative societies. Further, ‘moral’ norms that exploit or harm out-groups, such as “women should submit to men”, and “homosexuality is sinful”, are based on the idea that some people are more worthy of moral regard than others.

Could focusing on points of consensus, rather than on the best justification of that consensus (and perhaps there are multiple justifications), be a way forward for both the science and philosophy of morality?

We want to express our gratitude to all our participants for taking the time to record their thoughts about whether there is a universal morality. Perhaps this project will play a small part in advancing the cultural utility of research on the origins, and future, of morality.

Contributors



Russel Blackford

Russell Blackford is an Australian philosopher, legal scholar, and literary critic. He is editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Evolution and Technology*. He is the author or editor of numerous books, most recently *The Mystery of Moral Authority* (Palgrave, 2016).



Oliver Scott Curry

Dr. Oliver Scott Curry is a Senior Researcher, and Director of the Oxford Morals Project, at the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, University of Oxford. His research investigates the nature, content and structure of human morality.



Eric Dietrich

Eric Dietrich is professor of philosophy at Binghamton University and founding editor of the *Journal of Experimental and Theoretical Artificial Intelligence*. His work focuses on cognitive science, consciousness, artificial intelligence, metaphysics and epistemology.



Peter DeScioli

Peter DeScioli is Assistant Professor of Political Science and Associate Director of the interdisciplinary Center for Behavioral Political Economy at Stony Brook University. His research examines how principles of strategy shape elements of human psychology such as moral judgment.



Diana Fleischman

Diana Fleischman is an Associate Professor at the University of Portsmouth. In addition to psychological research Diana is involved in effective altruism and currently sits on the board for Sentience Institute, a think tank promoting expansion of the moral circle to nonhuman animals.



Gordon Ingram

Gordon Ingram is Associate Professor of Psychology at the Universidad de los Andes, Colombia. He teaches Developmental Psychology, Cyberpsychology, and Psychology of Language, and Cognition and Culture. His research centers on children's and adolescents' everyday communication online.



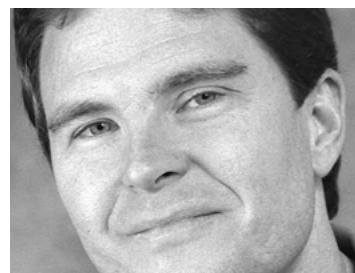
Robert Kurzban

Robert Kurzban is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Evolution and Human Behavior*, the Director of Undergraduate Studies in his department, and the President of the Human Behavior and Evolution Society.



Ryan McKay

Ryan McKay is Reader in Psychology at Royal Holloway, University of London, and Principal Investigator of the Royal Holloway Morality and Beliefs Lab (MaB-Lab). He has also worked as a clinical neuropsychologist at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery in London.



Andy Norman

Andy Norman works at reviving the forgotten virtue of wisdom. He teaches philosophy at Carnegie Mellon University and writes about the philosophical foundations of humanist values and topics ranging from the evolutionary origins of human reasoning to the architecture of knowledge systems.



Michael E. Price

Michael E. Price is Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Brunel University London. Much of his research has focused on evolutionary moral psychology. He is also interested in evolutionary theory's broad explanatory power across scientific domains from the cosmological to the biological.



Massimo Pigliucci

Massimo Pigliucci is the K.D. Irani Professor of Philosophy at the City College of New York. His most recent book is *How to Be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life*. He blogs at platofootnote.org.



Mark Sloan

Mark Sloan is TVOL Morality Topic Associate Editor. His main interest is how insights from the science of morality might enable societies to refine their moral codes to better meet human needs and preferences. His blog is scienceandmorality.com.



Elliott Sober

Elliott Sober teaches philosophy at University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research is in the philosophy of science, especially the philosophy of evolutionary biology and his most recent books are *Did Darwin Write the Origin Backwards?* (2011), and *Ockham's Razors – A User's Manual* (2015).



Richard Sosis

Richard Sosis is James Barnett Professor of Humanistic Anthropology at the University of Connecticut. His work has focused on the evolution of religion and cooperation. He is cofounder and coeditor of the journal *Religion, Brain & Behavior*.



Chris von Rueden

Chris von Rueden is an anthropologist and assistant professor of leadership studies at the University of Richmond. He studies status hierarchy and collective action in small-scale societies. Website: <https://sites.google.com/site/chrisvonrueden/home>



Harvey Whitehouse

Harvey Whitehouse is Chair of Social Anthropology and Director of the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology at the University of Oxford. He is a founding director of Seshat: Global History Databank, a huge volume of data on historical societies going back 5000 years.



David Sloan Wilson

David Sloan Wilson is SUNY Distinguished Professor of Biology and Anthropology at Binghamton University. He is also President of the Evolution Institute and Editor in Chief of *This View of Life Magazine*.



“Can an evolutionary perspective
reveal a universal morality?”

Maybe

Universal Morality – A Passel of Distinctions

by Elliott Sober

Before you say whether there is a universal morality, you need to decide what you mean by that phrase. Here is a passel of distinctions that are relevant to deciding. There are lots of choices, so there are lots of questions, and there is nothing wrong with some researchers addressing some while others address others.

1. Uniquely Believed v Uniquely True. Social scientists and evolutionary biologists will tend to focus on whether there is a single morality that all human beings, present and past, have embraced. It is obvious that people differ in their moral views. Their question is whether there are underlying commonalities. Philosophers, on the other hand, tend to focus on whether there is a single uniquely true morality – a morality that all human beings, past and present, ought to embrace. Philosophers differ in how they answer this question. I note that this is a philosophical question, not a question that science is in a position to answer.

Moralities involve principles, and having a morality involves formulating and endorsing a set of principles. This is a very sophisticated cognitive achievement. It goes well beyond parents wanting their children to thrive.

3. Slogans v Principles. Societies and individuals mouth short phrases about right and wrong, but it is often a mistake to think that these slogans accurately capture the principles that individuals and societies really endorse. I don't mean that people are insincere. They often are, but my point is that our moral convictions are often far more subtle than most of us are able to fully articulate. They are like the grammars of the languages we speak.

4. Societies v Groups v Individuals. A society promotes moral principles by framing laws and encouraging customs, but this does not mean that each individual in that society is fully on board. And in between the whole society and

**The question of whether there is a universal
morality requires clarification.**

2. Morality v Altruistic Motivation. Whether people sometimes care about the welfare of others, as an end in itself, and not just as a means to self-benefit, is a different question from whether they embrace a morality.

the individuals one by one, there are groups. This means that questions about universal morality can be posed at multiple levels of organization.

Do Universal Moral Intuitions Shape and Constrain Culturally Prevalent Moral Norms?

by Harvey Whitehouse and Ryan McKay

There is much evidence to suggest that humans everywhere recognize the virtues of kindness, fairness, loyalty, respect, sharing, courage, and obedience and abhor cruelty, cheating, betrayal, subversion, hoarding, cowardice, and disobedience^{2,5,10}. But people are often obliged to prioritize one virtue over others or condemn some vices more than others, depending on a wide range of contextual factors and goals. And this variability is apparent also at the level of entire cultural groups, some tending historically to emphasize certain virtues more highly or punishing particular vices more harshly than others. Social scientists have presented countless examples of moral values that serve to reinforce locally prevailing social structures – for example, that egalitarian hunter-gatherers value sharing¹⁴, armies demand loyalty and self-sacrifice⁴, chiefdoms emphasize respect for natural superiors¹¹, and affluent liberal democracies value kindness⁹.

At an even cruder level, it is possible to distinguish two main kinds of societies from a moral perspective: those that privilege individual rights (even at the cost of collective safety and security) and those that prioritize devotion and conformity to the group (even at the cost of personal freedoms and privileges). Durkheim associated the first kind of society with a highly elaborated division of labor in which a great diversity of human skills and abilities needed to be integrated into an organic whole, whereas deference to the group was more prominent in simple societies in which individual qualities mattered less³. A modern variant of this argument is presented by Moral Foundations

Theory which associates the individualizing virtues of care and fairness with Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (aka WEIRD) societies⁸ and more groupish and authoritarian moral values with traditional societies^{6,7}. It is possible also to characterize the whole of human history in terms of shifts of moral emphasis. For instance, despotism has been said to follow a U-shaped curve in cultural evolution: while our ancestors were egalitarian apes, valuing compassion and fairness, the rise of agriculture heralded increasingly cruel and repressive empires based on conquest, slavery, and the absolute power of rulers, but in the wake of the Axial Age and the rise of more ethical religions the tide turned again in the direction of increasingly liberal and democratic social formations¹. While the details of such theories could be wrong, they all suggest that moral systems are variations on a set of universal themes.

To use a nautical analogy, the relationship between universal morality and its cultural expressions may be compared to the way in which invisible anchors and chains constrain the movements of visible buoys floating on the surface of the sea. Universal moral intuitions are like anchors, invisible from the surface but immovably secured to the seabed, whereas culturally prevalent moral norms are like buoys on the surface of the water, available to direct observation. The same analogy might apply to numerous other domains of culture.

For example, there is much evidence that explicit religious beliefs, including so-called ‘theologically correct’ teachings of a given tradition¹², are similarly analogous to visible buoys while

more intuitive, or 'cognitively optimal' religious concepts¹³, are analogous to hidden anchor points.

thereby amplify or constrain their expression? Efforts to investigate questions of that kind

Universal moral intuitions are like anchors, invisible from the surface but immovably secured to the seabed, whereas culturally prevalent moral norms are like buoys on the surface of the water, available to direct observation.

A key question would then become whether there is some kind of interaction between different kinds of anchors and buoys. At the risk of over-extending this metaphor, we might ask whether the lines linking religious buoys and their anchors somehow get tangled up with normative buoys and moral anchors. For example, do theologically correct religious representations somehow activate our foundational moral principles and

would also need to take into account the effects of environmental factors on religion and morality, ranging from drought and pestilence to institutional innovation and warfare, analogous perhaps to the effects of wind and tides on the position of buoys. Efforts are only now beginning to explore the massive battery of empirically tractable research questions such an approach inevitably generates.

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On Morals, Rituals, and Obligations

by Richard Sosis

In the mid-1990s, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with the inhabitants of a remote atoll in the Federated States of Micronesia. Their contact with the outside world consisted of a government ship that, about six times a year, serviced the atoll and other remote islands in the region. Thus, it came as a great surprise when half a year into my fieldwork a yacht appeared one morning in the atoll's lagoon. The yacht was owned by a German couple who, following retirement, decided to travel the world by sea. They were clearly well versed in the cultural customs of Micronesia; once they disembarked they headed directly to the chief, with the appropriate gifts in tow, to ask permission to visit the atoll. While the German couple spoke to the chief, some teens decided to visit the yacht and help themselves to some of the retirees' equipment. When the couple returned to their yacht and noticed the

I was troubled by the affair, but conversations throughout the day made it clear that others did not share my concerns. As was explained to me, the retirees were wealthy so why shouldn't the teens help themselves to this surfeit? In their mind there was no stolen property or act of theft; this was simply an appropriate redistribution of wealth. I had heard this argument during my first days of fieldwork when I returned to my hut to find some new friends looking through my luggage. My anthropological training—understanding before judgment—was being tested to the limits. It was a useful encounter early in my fieldwork because it emphasized something that is more fully appreciated through experience than books: my moral assumptions were not necessarily their moral assumptions.

Anthropologists are often unwelcome guests to evolutionary conversations about

...breach of obligation may be 'one of the few, if not, indeed, the only act that is always and everywhere held to be immoral.

missing items they insisted that the chief find those who were responsible for the theft so that the stolen items could be returned. The chief, however, refused. The helpless couple eventually went on their way, presumably regretting that they had ever stopped for a visit.

human universals. My non-anthropological colleagues have understandably tired of the anthropological refrain "But in my tribe, they do X..." where X is some exception to whatever universal belief or behavior is under discussion. So yes, in our discussion we can scratch "stealing" off the list of potential universal moral rules, although on

Ifaluk taking resources from someone who does not exceed your wealth is immoral and understood as stealing. And of course, many other potential candidates ultimately fall short. For example, in many cultures killing is sanctioned under specific conditions (e.g., in defense) and incest is not only acceptable in some cultures but expected, especially among the aristocracy. Finding universal moral rules is no easy task.

Anthropologist Roy Rappaport, however, suggested that breach of obligation may be “one of the few, if not, indeed, the only act that is always and everywhere held to be immoral¹.” Rappaport’s argument is long and difficult, but in short, he suggested that ritual performances establish obligations to behave according to the moral values explicitly or implicitly encoded in the rituals. Rituals do not enforce moral behaviors—lying following an oath in a court of law is all too common—but

they do establish that such an action is no longer simply lying, it is a breach of a publicly accepted obligation (to tell the truth) and is now understood as perjury.

Why should anyone care that upholding obligations established through ritual is possibly a universal moral rule? Because it moves the conversation away from searching for humanity’s universal characteristics, a search that even if successful will not help us build a better world. As Adam Seligman and colleagues note, such commonalities will not provide guidance in living with our differences². Rappaport’s thesis does not sweep away the rich cultural diversity in moral rules, but rather posits a universal underlying structure through which moral obligations are established. Understanding this structure is vital for facing the inherent challenges of living in a morally diverse global community.

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Are Large-Scale Societies Outliers When It Comes To Core Elements Of Moral Judgment?

by Chris von Rueden

On the island of Sumba, Indonesia, the anthropologist Webb Keane described to a local woman how Americans freely choose their spouses. The woman exclaimed in shock, “So Americans just mate like animals!”¹

Human societies have varied tremendously in the behaviors or cultural practices that beget moral opprobrium or praise. But there are also some commonalities, which may constitute an evolved moral sense². Humans tend to judge unfairness, dishonesty, theft, disloyalty to the community, disrespect, impurity (e.g. incest), and harm of the vulnerable as morally bad, though the relative importance of these domains may vary cross-culturally³ and across the political spectrum⁴. Other putative, universal elements of human moral judgment include the distinction between intention and accident², and the tendency to see morals as absolute truths rather than parochial values⁵.

Most comparative studies of human moral judgment have been restricted to large-scale, industrialized populations, but critical tests of putative universals must include small-scale societies. Small-scale societies are characterized by traditional subsistence practices and low population density, and they tend to have less extensive formal legal systems. Humans have lived in small-scale societies for the large majority of our species’ existence, so small-scale societies better approximate the conditions under which

universals in moral judgment might have evolved.

The Culture and the Mind Project, directed by Stephen Laurence at the University of Sheffield, has recently published two studies of moral judgment across societies, importantly including many small-scale societies^{6,7}. The societies range from African hunter-gatherers to Amazonian horticulturalists to urban Americans. Participants from these societies were read vignettes, each of which described a different harm, including battery, theft, spreading a false rumor, bribery, violating a food taboo, and poisoning a well. Participants reported the “badness” of the harms, as well as effects on perpetrators’ reputation and probability of being punished. In the first study, harms were judged less bad/punishable/reputation-reducing (but still unacceptable) when described as occurring far away rather than in a nearby community, distant in time rather than in the present, and approved rather than unsanctioned by a local authority figure. In other words, there was cross-cultural evidence of moral parochialism. In the second study, harms were judged more bad/punishable/reputation-reducing when described as intentional.

In both studies, there was significant variation across societies in terms of sensitivity to these moderations of harm. Urban Americans were as or more morally parochial than several of the small-scale societies. But urban Americans were

more likely to increase the severity of their badness ratings when harms were intentional. Intention had the least effect among rural Fijians, which is notable since other populations in Oceania have been described by anthropologists as having “mental opacity” norms- a reluctance to discuss or act on what others are thinking.¹

adjudication processes that adopt less explicit standards of evidence, or the presence of witchcraft beliefs wherein attributions of bad intentions can lead to cycles of violence⁷. Future cross-cultural studies of moral judgment should pair standardized protocols with detailed ethnography to test among these and other possibilities⁸.

Most comparative studies of human moral judgment have been restricted to large-scale, industrialized populations, but critical tests of putative universals must include small-scale societies.

Moral parochialism, whether found in large or small-scale societies, is consistent with several evolutionary theories of moral judgment, in which punitive sentiment is calibrated to its immediate effects on our relationships with group members⁶. Why societies vary in moral parochialism requires theory development. Similarly, additional theorizing is needed to explain why societies vary in the moral weight given to intentions. In many small-scale societies, the reasons underlying actions may be less important in moral judgments because of increased emphasis on kin-group (vs. individual) responsibility,

Identifying how moral judgment changes within a society will also improve our understanding of the origins of the cross-cultural variation. A recent longitudinal study found that Millennials in Western large-scale societies are more utilitarian in their moral judgments than past generations⁹. I am currently tracking how, in one small-scale society (the Tsimane’ of Bolivia), an individual’s prestige positions him or her to shift others’ moral judgments.

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Universal morality is obscured by evolved morality

by Diana Fleischman

Every earthworm has, at one point, been your mother.

Buddhism has many such thought experiments, ways to expand our notions of morality, to align it with what I'll call here "universal morality".

Universal morality is obscured by our evolved morality. Some problems cause disproportionate suffering; there are ways to greater optimize the flourishing of humans and other sentient beings. Our moral psychology, however, is designed to punish those who challenge our in-group's interests, reward those who work in our favor and maintain our signaled moral identity. This evolved morality not only obscures universal morality but also creates an aversion to improvements to humans that would align our intuitions with actions that promote sentient well-being.

Progress on problems further away from our evolved intuitions, such as in mathematics and physics, has always been faster than progress on understanding human psychology and moral philosophy. The fewer layers of evolved psychology to peel away, the faster progress can be made. B.F. Skinner noted it should be more difficult to send a man to the moon than to implement effective education or to rehabilitate criminals. He lamented the degree to which we can control the inanimate, including weapons, without the wherewithal to solve social problems. Why? Humans

anthropomorphize themselves. Understanding of psychology is clouded by intuitions especially the strong intuition that humans are not objects of a deterministic universe.

Morality is too close to our eyes for us to see. Compounding the confusion of studying anything as intimate as our own psychology is the self-deception integral to moral psychology. We punish those who transgress while looking for loopholes for ourselves, making self-reported moral reasoning especially suspect. In the trolley problem participants are more likely to make utilitarian choices the greater their distance from the action that caused one death instead of many (e.g. choosing to save three lives instead of one). There is no real difference between pushing someone onto the tracks and flipping a switch except in terms of plausible deniability. Detecting psychopaths was an important ancestral problem. Thus our conscious moral reasoning is optimized to signal we are not psychopaths. "True" evolved moral reasoning is insulated from conscious awareness. Consistency, virtue and capacity for self-punishment, otherwise known as guilt, are prioritized over aggregate benefit.

Moral debates dance around biting bullets and avoiding fanciful repugnant conclusions. Advocates of moral perspectives confuse morality with the desire to preserve their reputations or align with the intuitions of their readers. Thought experiments can help us

transcend our evolved psychology but the vast majority of moral reasoning celebrates the output of essentially vestigial moral emotions. There is no wisdom in repugnance. Nor is there any wisdom in beliefs we develop to align our intuitions with those of others, preserve our reputations or signal we are not psychopaths.

evolutionary psychology is that it condones immoral behavior by pointing to its natural origins. Far from it, I believe we must acknowledge the shadow of our evolved morality in order to transcend it. The rapid development of artificial intelligence has both confused and clarified our vision of a universal

Evolved morality not only obscures universal morality but also creates an aversion to improvements to humans that would align our intuitions with actions that promote sentient well-being.

We have made leaps and bounds in moral achievement compared to the deep history of humanity and to the rest of the natural world. Some consider nonhuman animals their in-group, or at least, are signaling their expanded moral circle. There are hacks that stretch our moral circle outside our ingroup, like narrative fiction and meditation. The world is a much better place than it was, but an evolutionary perspective does predict limits to this moral expansion. The flourishing of sentient beings is still impeded by moral disgust, outrage, and self-deception. Ironically, moral enhancement such as augmenting intelligence with embryo selection, the only means by which we may expand our moral circle, is averted by feelings of disgust, neophobic anxiety and an attachment to an amorphous, ill-defined concept of “natural”. One prominent criticism of

morality. We don't want our self-driving cars to choose to kill three pedestrians rather than injure one driver. Most of us would want an artificial superintelligence to work for the aggregate good, to limit suffering and increase well-being rather than signal consistency, disgust sensitivity, guilt or commitment to tradition. Why shouldn't we modify ourselves to become more moral as well?

A moral artificial intelligence should have very different moral goals than the average human, but how will we be able to build one with our evolved moral intuitions in place?

Dear Seed AI, every living being has, at some point, been your mother.

Why It's Unwise to Deny Moral Universals

by A. P. Norman

Are there moral universals? At first glance, this looks like a question of fact. To answer it, we'd have to nominate some candidates for universal moral truth, and check to see whether everyone accepts them. We could ask all 7.6 billion people, for example, whether they think recreational cruelty is wrong. Given human perversity, there's a good chance that some will answer "no." In that sense, there are probably no moral universals.

But that's not the question we really mean to ask, is it? What we want to know is whether any moral strictures are binding on us all. So clarified, the answer flips: Of course there are moral universals. "Recreational cruelty is wrong" is an incontestable example of the type in question. Yes, some nut job might assert otherwise, but why should we listen to him? Either he doesn't understand the question, or he's being needlessly perverse. More important, he's obligated to avoid recreational cruelty whether he knows it or not.

Invariably, clever people come up with counterexamples. 'What about sadomasochists and the organizers of ultra-marathons: don't they facilitate recreational cruelty?' Such counterexamples miss the point. I could just as well have nominated "It's wrong to visit recreational cruelty on the unconsenting." Or "Pointless suffering is a bad thing." Remember, one instance of a moral universal suffices to prove the existence claim.

A single instance, though, doesn't tell us what we really want to know. We want to know whether anything like a well-functioning value system has universal validity.

For much of the twentieth century, the politically correct answer was 'No: universally valid value systems don't exist.' People worried that an affirmative answer would license political or cultural imperialism: people could get the idea that things really are right and wrong, and this might lead them to impose their values on others. In this way, it became trendy to deny moral universals.

Trendy, but wrong-headed. For one thing, there's a big gap between "Moral universals exist" and "I have all the answers." Recognizing moral universals needn't render one arrogant and ready to impose. Second, our tendency to deny moral universals subverts the search for common moral ground. (Why engage in value inquiry if moral truths don't exist?) Third, denying that there are common moral truths doesn't just humble cultural imperialists; it also humbles the compassionate and the tolerant, robbing them of conviction. Cultural relativism robs us of moral courage.

Fortunately, the moral sciences are starting to change all of this. Moral and social psychology, game theory, ethology, primatology, evolutionary psychology: all of these shed light on the origins and functioning of moral

sensibilities (also moral intuitions, norms, and rules). We now know that morality evolved to serve a “pro-social” function: in the past, it promoted cooperation and survival. Yes, the first nervous systems prioritized self-care, giving the creatures that bore them a survival advantage, but natural selection has repurposed our nervous systems to also care for kin, friends, and tribesmen. Our brains now deliver a mix of self and other-regarding intuitions.

On the whole, our instincts are more selfish, short-sighted and tribal than is warranted. To properly promote shared wellbeing, we must deliberately discount some moral intuitions,

kindness over cruelty, for example, isn’t arbitrary. Why? Well, kindness is objectively more conducive to shared wellbeing than cruelty is. The same goes for fairness over unfairness, and honesty over deceit. Given basic facts about animal nervous systems, some things really are better than others.

You don’t need much in the way of normative assumptions to convert these facts into moral principles. Consider the assertion: “All else being equal, more wellbeing is better than less.” Who could object? Anyone worth taking seriously? Surely not: it’s all but definitionally true. This simple idea is an excellent place to begin building ethical common ground.

You don’t need much in the way of normative assumptions to convert facts into values. Consider the assertion: “All else being equal, more wellbeing is better than less.” Who could object? It’s all but definitionally true.

and deliberately amplify others. Here, moral norms prove useful. Prohibitions against lying, cheating, and stealing, for example. “Be nice” is a good rule of thumb, as is “Respect basic rights.” “Treat others the way you like to be treated” is pretty nifty, too. It’s not hard to extend the list.

Notice that exhortations like these are more than merely subjective. Our preference for

It’s like a seed crystal: add this idea to a solution of facts, and all kinds of moral truths precipitate out. And the truths you get—such as “Best not to harm conscious critters”—have a strong claim to universal validity. So why not assert the existence of moral universals? By so doing, we affirm our commitment to behaviors that tend to improve our collective lot.

Could Morality Have A Transcendent, Naturalistic Purpose?

by Michael Price

I'll interpret the question "Is there a universal morality?" in both a conventional and unconventional manner.

First, briefly, a more conventional response (conventional from the perspective of behavioral biology, anyway) would be "yes and no." Because there is an evolved human nature, the same behavioral patterns tend to crop up repeatedly across cultures (and in some cases, across species). These include behaviors we'd categorize as "moral", such as reciprocal altruism, free-rider punishment, kin altruism, incest avoidance, and cooperative signaling. Even though these behaviors can be considered universal, however, the psychological adaptations that regulate them may be facultatively evoked and prioritized in some environments more than others. We therefore observe cross-cultural variation in the extent to which these behaviors are expressed. For instance, although all cultures have some restrictions on the permissibility of sex between genetic kin¹, some cultures regard sex between first cousins as taboo while others encourage it. Another example is cooperative signaling²: although the signaling of moral virtue and cooperative disposition appears to be a universal behavior, there is cultural diversity in the specific signals used (e.g., whether abstinence from a particular food is regarded as virtuous or not).

Now for a more unconventional interpretation. Could morality be "universal" in the sense that there is some transcendent moral purpose to human existence itself? The conventional interpretation offered above assumes that

morality emanates ultimately from human nature, which itself evolved ultimately to enable genetic survival and reproduction. But could morality have some larger purpose, that transcends and subsumes biologically-evolved human interests?

This is a tricky question because natural selection is the only process known to science that can ultimately engineer "purpose" (moral or otherwise). It does so by generating "function," which is essentially synonymous with "purpose": the function/purpose of an eye, for example, is to see. And if selection is the only natural source of purpose, it is hard to see how morality could ultimately serve any larger kind of purpose. Conventional religions sidestep this problem, of course, by positing a supernatural purpose provider. But that's an unsatisfactory solution if you wish to maintain a naturalistic worldview.

To most people with a naturalistic worldview, the issue ends here. There can be no transcendent purpose because no widely-understood natural process can generate such purpose. Transcendent purpose is a subject for religion, and maybe for philosophy, but not for science. That's the standard naturalistic conclusion.

The standard naturalistic conclusion is premature, however. There is one way in which transcendent, naturalistic moral purpose could, in fact, exist.

If selection is the only natural source of purpose, then transcendent moral purpose could exist if selection were operating at some level more

fundamental than the biological. Specifically, transcendent purpose would require a process of cosmological natural selection, with universes being selected from a multiverse based on their

of biological (including biocultural) evolution alone. It suggests, rather, that biological/biocultural evolution is itself a subroutine of a larger evolutionary process.

There is one way in which transcendent naturalistic purpose could in fact exist.

reproductive ability, and intelligence emerging (as a subroutine of cosmological evolution) as a higher-level adaptation for universe reproduction. From this perspective, intelligent life (including its moral systems) would have a transcendent purpose: to eventually develop the sociopolitical and technical expertise that would enable it to cooperatively create new universes. This creation process would enable universe reproduction, because these new universes would need to be governed by the same physical laws and parameters as the original universe, in order for intelligent life to be able to exist in them.

Importantly, this idea of “cosmological natural selection with intelligence”³⁻⁸ does not dispute that morality is ultimately explicable in terms

of biological (including biocultural) evolution alone. It suggests, rather, that biological/biocultural evolution is itself a subroutine of a larger evolutionary process. These ideas are highly speculative and may seem strange, especially if you haven’t heard them before. But notions of cosmological natural selection, and of life as a mechanism of universe reproduction, are not so new or radical. They have been under development for decades now³⁻¹¹, and are reasonably consistent with existing bodies of scientific knowledge.

At any rate, my goal here is not to argue that these ideas are likely to be true, nor that they are likely to be false. I simply want to point out that if they’re false, then it seems like it must also be false – from a naturalistic perspective, at least – that morality could have any transcendent purpose.

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Moral Universals, Moral Particulars and Tinbergen's Four Questions

by David Sloan Wilson

Niko Tinbergen, a pioneer in the study of animal behavior, wisely observed that four questions need to be asked for all products of evolution¹.

1. Given that a trait is an adaptation, what is its function that contributes to survival and reproduction?

2. Given that evolution is a historical process, what is the phylogeny of the trait?

3. Given that all traits (including behaviors) have a physical basis, what is the mechanism of the trait?

4. Given that all traits must come into being during the lifetime of the organism, what is the development of the trait?

Tinbergen's four questions apply to any variation-and-selection process, including but not restricted to genetic evolution². Accordingly, they can be insightful for the study of moral universals and particulars as products of human genetic and cultural evolution.

Function: The most general statement that can be made about human morality is a functional one: In virtually all cultures, most people have a sense of right and wrong that corresponds to the welfare of their groups. Also, most people create, abide by, and enforce norms on the basis of what they regard as right and wrong. Notice that this generality is statistical in nature. It admits the possibility that some individuals might not

qualify as moral. For example, psychopaths are said to lack a sense of right and wrong, treating everything as instrumental to their desires³. In most experimental games that measure cooperative behavior, a sizable fraction of individuals don't cooperate and/or don't punish norm transgressions⁴. Nevertheless, enough individuals behave morally in virtually all cultures so that the cultures function as moral systems.

Phylogeny: The reason that we are psychologically endowed to behave morally, to the extent that we do, is because of a historical process of between-group selection. As Darwin conjectured long ago, individuals who behave morally are vulnerable to more self-serving individuals within their own groups, but groups of individuals who behave morally robustly out-compete groups whose members can't pull together. The fact that between-group selection (favoring the traits associated with morality) is often opposed by within-group selection (favoring the traits associated with immorality) explains why all of us behave immorally at least some of the time and some of us more than others. Insofar as different environments call for different behaviors to benefit a given group, the specific behaviors that count as moral can be highly variable. Also, not everything that evolves is an adaptation. There are byproducts, products of drift, and mismatches (adaptive in past but not present environments) for cultural in addition to genetic evolution. Thus, Tinbergen's Phylogeny question can explain a lot of moral particularism.

Mechanism: What takes place in our brains when we behave morally? The answer might be “it depends”. One person might behave out of a sense of duty. Another might take pleasure in helping others. Another might be trying to earn a ticket to heaven. There is inherently a one-to-many relationship between the function

their underlying mechanisms that evolve in any particular culture will also have particularistic developmental pathways.

This will require a rethinking of some stage theories of human moral development. For example, in Kohlberg’s theory of moral

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of a trait and the proximate mechanisms that evolve to cause it. This is important because philosophers often reason on the basis of their own moral intuition as if it must be culturally universal. There is no warrant for this assumption from an evolutionary perspective. We must realize that the proverb “there are many ways to skin a cat” applies to the mechanisms underlying moral behaviors along with many other kinds of behaviors.

development⁵, the highest stage is driven by universal ethical principles. When this “stage” is reconceptualized as a moral system that competes against other moral systems, it requires very special conditions to evolve, which accounts for the fact that most individuals and cultures don’t achieve it. Creating such a moral system is an important normative goal that I share, but there is no warrant for calling it a stage in a developmental sense.

Development: Our core psychological ability to function as moral agents might qualify as universal or nearly so, with developmental stages that are correspondingly universal. However, the particular moral systems and

While the topic deserves much more than a short commentary, Tinbergen’s four questions might prove as useful for organizing the study of morality as for all other products of evolution.

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“Can an evolutionary perspective reveal a universal morality?”

No

Moral Disagreement is Universal

by Robert Kurzban and Peter DeScioli

What is universal about morality is morality itself: cross-culturally, people think that some behaviors are wrong, and so deserve disapproval and punishment⁶. However, while the capacity for moral judgment is universal, there is tremendous variability in which behaviors people think are immoral⁵. We suspect that debates about moral universals are actually motivated by a different question: Can people reach a consensus about which actions should be morally prohibited?

Moral consensus is not only an abstract philosophical matter. People are worried about moral consensus for good reason. When a community disagrees about the moral laws of the land, they can no longer rely on the rules to settle conflicts. Disputes are more likely to escalate with costly consequences for everyone^{2,3}. Moreover, rival coalitions struggle to impose their rules on those who disagree, further fomenting costly fighting¹⁰.

In this context, what is universal about morality is disagreement. In all societies, people disagree, often violently, about which actions are immoral. For instance, recently, a prominent politician in India offered a \$1.5 million bounty to decapitate a popular actress who portrayed a Hindu queen in a way he thought was morally offensive. Artistic expression or capital offense? Unfortunately, these kinds of moral disagreements are universal.

Human moral judgment allows virtually any action to become a prohibited and punishable offense. A key reason is that individuals need to keep track of the moral rules in a community so they can avoid crossing moral boundaries. Because moral rules

are variable and changing, people need a flexible moral psychology that can moralize whichever actions are taboo in a given group⁹. However, this does not mean that people only passively accept their group's rules; they also actively advocate for the moral rules they prefer, especially when they can find supporters to join their cause⁷.

Many moral prohibitions have strategic consequences because they constrain some people more than others⁴. When a particular action is punished – such as same-sex marriage, eating beef, black magic, disobeying authority, stem cell research – the subset of people who want to take that action are worse off; those who don't want to do the action are unaffected or even gain a relative advantage. Given these strategic consequences, people tend to fight to sway the rules that affect them the most¹¹.

This means that people's efforts to persuade a community to adopt a moral rule – thou shalt not X – are essentially efforts to coerce a subset of the community into a moral regime they would rather not be in. In practice, then, a society's morality creates a form of mob rule in which the moral prohibitions are determined by the most powerful coalition, which is often the one backed by the more numerous faction. Majoritarian political regimes, while having many virtues, allow majorities to coerce minorities with the sticks afforded them by moral rules.

Amid all of this conflict, however, our moral psychology does have elements that can promote consensus. When almost everyone benefits from a moral prohibition, it generally becomes a matter of consensus because

everyone ends up advocating for the same rules. This applies to the most universal prohibitions such as those against (unprovoked intentional) killing, harming, stealing, and lying. These agreeable morals can be leveraged to build consensus.

least some sense of compassion and concern for others' welfare. Importantly, our sense of compassion is psychologically distinct from our moral principles and prohibitions². Contrary to traditional views, people do not actually need moral rules to care about others' well-being.

We can find a path to moral consensus by focusing on our shared concerns for people's welfare, rather than contentious and divisive moral principles.

This idea underlies utilitarian philosophy, that a rule should be adopted if it leads to net benefits to society¹. This philosophy basically attempts to build consensus around the concept of welfare, while diminishing the large variety of contentious moral rules about other matters such as taboos surrounding food, sex, or supernatural beliefs.

Instead, we should aim to use our universal sense of compassion to guide the choice of moral prohibitions toward greater consensus. This idea differs from what we typically see in politics, where politicians appeal to coalitions and moral principles, emphasizing who is right and who is wrong^{8,11}. In contrast, leaders who wish to build a broad consensus should emphasize how their policies will improve people's welfare, especially by meeting people's most pressing needs.

We can find a path to moral consensus by focusing on our shared concerns for people's welfare, rather than contentious and divisive moral principles. All normal humans have at

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Our Modern Moral Predicament

by Russell Blackford

I understand morality as a human invention, underpinned by our evolved emotional tendencies and our existential situation. Morality is thus a technology that responds to our needs as social animals^{1,5,6}. It facilitates cooperation, originally in small groups in competition with each other and with the local non-human predators^{3,6}. It provides a counterweight to our limited rationality, information, intelligence, and sympathies⁶.

From the viewpoint of an ordinary person who has been socialized into a particular moral system, the local moral norms will usually seem like something more impressive and metaphysical than I've described. They will

binding upon all rational beings that might exist in the universe, it is implausible that they exist—and indeed, the idea seems to defy coherent explanation^{2,4,6}. Might there, nonetheless, be one true morality for human beings (not necessarily for whatever other rational beings happen to exist) grounded in a common human nature and transcending the desires and attitudes of particular people and the varied moral systems of actual societies⁶?

This still seems unlikely. It requires a more harmonious and purposive conception of human nature than appears scientifically and historically plausible^{6,7}. We probably won't discover a single perfect way of life for either

The outer limits of moral possibility are established by the emotional tendencies that prepare us to be morality-making beings.

appear to be categorically authoritative; they will be experienced as objective requirements for conduct. For most people, that is, their society's standards for conduct appear to be necessitated by a mind-independent reality that transcends any mere social institutions and anyone's contingent desires and attitudes^{2,4,6}. In typical societies, this appearance is taken to be the reality and given some kind of supernatural explanation.

If objective moral requirements are construed as transcending human nature itself, and as

individuals or societies. That said, not just any set of proposed norms can form a viable moral system. Natural boundaries are shaped by the function of morality in facilitating social cooperation. The outer limits of moral possibility are established by the emotional tendencies that prepare us to be morality-making beings. In particular, we care most about ourselves (as individuals), our offspring, kin, mates, and other affiliates¹. We show some restraint in hurting each other, a degree of natural kindness and reciprocity, positive attitudes to helpfulness, and a disposition to

seek vengeance when betrayed and to punish non-cooperators³.

Moral systems vary considerably, but some virtues of character, such as courage and honesty, are likely to be regarded highly in any human society. Conversely, no human society can tolerate unlimited ruthlessness in social, sexual, and economic competition within the group; more specifically, each society insists on limits to intra-group violence. A full and systematic understanding of the phenomenon of morality would include both the possibilities for variation in moral systems and the boundaries within which variants proliferate. Against that background, our modern moral predicament involves at least two interrelated problems. First, we increasingly live in societies that contain relatively little in the way of a unitary moral system. Instead, contemporary

societies blend different groups with complex, diverse, yet intertwined, histories, and with their own religious and moral traditions. Rival traditions often confront each other within the same society, struggling for political and cultural supremacy³.

Second, the world's societies—again with divergent moral traditions—increasingly need to cooperate with each other to handle problems on a very large scale⁶. In this situation, our existing moralities and our evolved emotional tendencies do not necessarily serve us well. They helped us to cooperate and survive in small, often mutually suspicious, groups. Arguably, they are not so helpful when we come to terms with global issues of climate change, epidemic diseases, and the spread of massively destructive weapons.

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Is there a universal morality?

by Massimo Pigliucci

No, there is no such thing as a universal morality, and it is somewhat surprising that people are still asking this question in the 21st century. Then again, that doesn't mean that anything goes, a la moral relativism. Of course, much depends on what one means by "universal," so let's try to parse things out a bit.

To begin with, if by "universal" we mean that morality is like the laws of physics, or like mathematical theorems, or perhaps like the laws of logic, then forget it. Setting aside interesting discussions on the nature of mathematics and logic and whether even their tenets are truly universal or not, morality isn't even in the ballpark.

"Morality" comes from the Latin *moralis*, the word used by Cicero to translate the Greek *êthos*. The Latin word refers more properly to the habits and customs of a people, while the Greek one is related to the idea of character. So "morality" is concerned with people's characters and how we interact with each other in society.

Indeed, the modern, especially Western, secular conception of morality as having to do with a universal code of behavior, with Right and Wrong (note the capitalization) is a recent phenomenon, mostly to be traced to the Enlightenment and particularly to the figure of Immanuel Kant. And that's not a good thing, unfortunately.

Kant wanted to put moral philosophy on the same firm footing that Newton had provided for natural philosophy (what we today call

science, though at the time it was mostly physics). And he thought he could do that by sheer force of reason. Rejecting — rightly — any divine inspiration on the matter, Kant arrived at what he thought was a universal logic of morality, his famous categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." Kantian deontology (i.e., duty-based ethics) has all sorts of specific problems, well known to philosophers, but the most fundamental one is that moral philosophy is nothing like physics. Or logic.

Rather, the ancient Greeks and Romans were far closer to the mark: ethics has to do with how to arrive at as harmonious social interactions as it is humanly possible, and this can be done in a variety of different ways, which is why Socrates at one point said that what goes in Athens does not go in Sparta, and vice versa.

This begins to sound suspiciously like moral relativism, though, and yet very few of the ancients would fall under that category (except the Sophists, the precursors of both modern lawyers and of radical postmodernists...). What saved ancient ethics from relativism, and what will save us more than two millennia later, if we stop listening to Kant (or John Stuart Mill, or a lot of other modern moral philosophers) is the existence of human nature.

Socrates, the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Cynics, and a number of other Greco-Roman schools agreed on one thing: human beings are a particular type of animal, and that particularity lies chiefly in two aspects of what it means

to be human: we are highly social, and we are capable of reason.

of a social animal naturally requires, and as it requires.” (Meditations, IV.24)

...ethics has to do with how to arrive at as harmonious social interactions as it is humanly possible.

The first bit means that we are all deeply inter-dependent on other people. Despite the fashionable nonsense, especially in the United States, about “self-made men” (they are usually men), there actually is no such thing. Without social bonds and support our lives would be, as Thomas Hobbes famously put it, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. The second bit, the one about intelligence, does not mean that we always, or even often, act rationally. Only that we have the capability to do so. Ethics, then, especially (but not only) for the Stoics becomes a matter of “living according to nature,” meaning not to endorse whatever is natural (that’s an elementary logical fallacy), but rather to take seriously the two pillars of human nature: sociality and reason. As Marcus Aurelius put it, “Do what is necessary, and whatever the reason

There is something, of course, the ancients did get wrong: they, especially Aristotle, thought that human nature was the result of a teleological process, that everything has a proper function, determined by the very nature of the cosmos. We don’t believe that anymore, not after Copernicus and especially Darwin. But we do know that human beings are indeed a particular product of complex and ongoing evolutionary processes. These processes do not determine a human essence, but they do shape a statistical cluster of characters that define what it means to be human. That cluster, in turn, constrains — without determining — what sort of behaviors are pro-social and lead to human flourishing, and what sort of behaviors don’t. And ethics is the empirically informed philosophical enterprise that attempts to understand and articulate that distinction.



“Can an evolutionary perspective
reveal a universal morality?”

Yes

Morality is Objective

by Eric Dietrich

The world is increasingly embracing diversity – religious, cultural, and political diversity, for example. Embracing diversity means being more tolerant of differences between individuals and groups, both large and small. This surge of tolerance is accompanied by an increasing moral relativism, especially among young people. Moral relativism is thought to naturally accompany tolerance.

Consider the burka, an enveloping outer garment some Muslim traditions require their women to wear. Burqas cover the woman's body and often, her face. Many thoughtful non-Muslim people, especially in the west, while rejecting, or not accepting, burqas for women in general because, e.g., they seem sexist, do accept, or do not object to, the practice of wearing burqas where it is practiced. This is because wearing burqas is an integral part of an ongoing, robust culture.

morality, cannot be the whole story. There is a need for clear, definite moral lines that cannot be crossed without (near) universal, robust condemnation: racial and gender discrimination, sexual harassment, terrorism, and ignoring global warming are often thought of as objectively morally wrong. But this moral objectivity seems to be accepted only for such big issues as those just listed. Relativism appears to hold sway over much of our daily conversations and judgments.

There is, however, a clear path to a universal and powerful moral objectivity, the view that morality (or most of it, anyway) is just as objectively true as science and mathematics. The key ingredient is the notion of harm.

Every living animal with a nervous system can and does experience harm (it may be that every living thing experiences harm, but that

...morality (or most of it, anyway) is just as objectively true as science and mathematics. The key ingredient is the notion of harm

A westerner might say: "I reject burqas as sexist, but this is just my personal view; others have different views, and theirs are just as legitimate as mine." This is relativism: the view that different moral norms are equally moral and are therefore to be tolerated.

Relativism, even if part of the story of human

is an issue for another time). Harm is marked by pain, fear, hunger, thirst, sadness, frustration, ...any negative emotion. We live in a universe that randomly dishes out harm – consider the extinction of the non-avian dinosaurs, as just one example. But we can check both intentional harm, which is under our control, and other types of unintentional

harm, e.g., environmental damage caused by development.

The question now is “Why ought we to check (or mitigate) such harm.” The answer is because it is harm. Harm is bad by definition. Morality requires us to avoid doing bad things, again, by definition. Hence we all have a moral duty not to harm other living things. This moral duty exists objectively because harm exists

objectively. Just as $1 + 1 = 2$ is objectively true, so “we should not harm other living things” is objectively true. This truth is based simply on the fact that harming exists and should be checked.

Of course, implementing this moral truth is quite complex. But that is a story also for another day.

Harmful Intentions Are Always Seen As Bad

by Gordon Ingram

While many moral norms are arguably universal¹, I will focus here on a kind of moral meta-norm, namely, the importance of an actor's intentions for people who make moral evaluations of their actions. Some of the best evidence for the universal importance of intentions comes from developmental psychology, showing how moral reasoning works before children have received much cultural learning about social rules. Experiments using animated characters have shown that even completely pre-verbal infants implicitly prefer characters who try to help another character, but fail, to those who try to hinder another character but accidentally help them².

A further development takes place when children aged 6 or 7 stop explicitly condemning characters that accidentally harm another character, despite having intentions to help them. This phenomenon is generally known as the outcome-to-intention shift³, implying that children move from a focus on morally evaluating the outcomes of actions to evaluating the intentions behind the actions. This is, in fact, a misnomer, as only bad outcomes with good intentions are affected by the transition. Good intentions with good outcomes are always judged favorably, while bad intentions with bad outcomes are always judged negatively. The only other interesting combination is that of bad intentions with good outcomes. Previous work showed that children as young as four nearly always judge such

cases unfavorably⁴. My Ph.D. student, Camilo Moreno, and I recently replicated that result with a cultural group (relatively low-income Colombian children) whose moral reasoning had never before been studied like this. We also demonstrated that it held true even for children as young as three who did not pass a standard false-belief task – that is, they seemed incapable of representing beliefs of another person that differed from their own⁵.

If we assume that these young children are condemning someone for an intention to break a rule, it seems strange that while unable to understand that someone can have a wrong belief, they are yet able to understand that someone can have a wrong intention (that is, an intention to break a rule that they themselves would follow). A more natural interpretation is perhaps that across the various scenarios that we used, the characters are being judged for an intention to harm. We already know that three-year-old children are capable of understanding the concept of harm because even three-year-old children easily distinguish between two types of normative rules: conventional rules, which are authority dependent, vary from place to place, and tend to have less serious consequences if violated; and moral rules, which are independent of whether an authority figure says they should be obeyed, apply everywhere, and whose violations have serious consequences⁶. Only the second type of rule is associated with the

idea of harm: when asked why moral rules should be followed, children spontaneously bring up the idea of harmful repercussions to not following them but tend not to mention harm in connection with conventional rules.

the perpetrators, and thus no material harm would result.

Reflecting on these experiments in the light of the importance of intentional understanding

...it makes evolutionary sense that people would be hyper-vigilant about harmful intent, reading people's morally relevant actions for clues of possible intentions to harm the values and structures that their own group holds dear.

In contrast, authors such as Jonathan Haidt⁷ have argued from a “moral pluralist” point of view that concerns about harm (and its positive counterpart, care) represent just one of at least five foundational systems in human moral psychology. Much of the evidence for this comes from experiments in which working conservative, working-class, or non-Western participants would condemn much more harshly than their liberal, middle-class, or Western counterparts such transgressions as having sex with an already-dead chicken, cleaning a lavatory with the national flag, or incest between consenting adults, even though it was made clear that these transgressions would not be witnessed by anyone other than

in moral development, it occurs to me that although no material harm resulted in the vignettes, the characters in them may have been judged for their apparent intentions to harm: not to do material harm, but to do symbolic harm to a group, authority or belief system. From the perspective of cultural group selection⁸, it makes evolutionary sense that people would be hyper-vigilant about harmful intent, reading people's morally relevant actions for clues of possible intentions to harm the values and structures that their own group holds dear. The importance of all this is that it instructs us to remember that our ideological opponents may feel threatened by our ideas, just as we can feel threatened by theirs.

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Seven Moral Rules Found All Around the World

by Oliver Scott Curry

What is morality? And are there any universal moral values? Scholars have debated these questions for millennia. But now, thanks to science, we have the answers.

Converging lines of evidence – from game theory, ethology, psychology, and anthropology – suggest that morality is a collection of tools for promoting cooperation¹.

because there are many types of cooperation, there will be many types of morality. Kin selection explains why we feel a special duty of care for our families, and why we abhor incest. Mutualism explains why we form groups and coalitions (there is strength and safety in numbers), and hence why we value unity, solidarity, and loyalty. Social exchange explains why we trust others, reciprocate favors, feel

Morality is always and everywhere a cooperative phenomenon

For 50 million years humans and their ancestors have lived in social groups. During this time natural selection equipped them with a range of adaptations for realizing the enormous benefits of cooperation that social life affords. More recently, humans have built on these benevolent biological foundations with cultural innovations – norms, rules, institutions – that further bolster cooperation. Together, these biological and cultural mechanisms provide the motivation for social, cooperative and altruistic behavior; and they provide the criteria by which we evaluate the behavior of others. And, according to the theory of ‘morality as cooperation’, it is precisely this collection of cooperative traits that constitute human morality.

What’s more, the theory leads us to expect that,

guilt and gratitude, make amends, and forgive. And conflict resolution explains: why we engage in costly displays of prowess such as bravery and generosity; why we defer to our superiors; why we divide disputed resources fairly; and why we recognize prior possession.

And, as predicted by the theory, these seven moral rules – love your family, help your group, return favors, be brave, defer to authority, be fair, and respect others’ property – appear to be universal across cultures. My colleagues and I analyzed ethnographic accounts of ethics from 60 societies (comprising over 600,000 words from over 600 sources)². We found that these seven cooperative behaviors were always considered morally good. We found examples of most of these morals in most societies. Crucially,

there were no counter-examples – no societies in which any of these behaviors were considered morally bad. And we observed these morals with equal frequency across continents; they were not the exclusive preserve of ‘the West’ or any other region.

For example, among the Amhara, “flouting kinship obligation is regarded as a shameful deviation, indicating an evil character”. In Korea, there exists an “egalitarian community ethic [of] mutual assistance and cooperation among neighbors [and] strong in-group solidarity”. “Reciprocity is observed in every stage of Garo life [and] has a very high place in the Garo social structure of values”. Among the Maasai, “Those who cling to warrior virtues are still highly respected”, and “the uncompromising ideal of supreme warriorhood [involves] ascetic commitment to self-sacrifice... in the heat of battle, as a supreme display of courageous loyalty”. The Bemba exhibit “a deep sense of respect for elders’ authority”. The Kapauku “idea of justice” is called “uta-uta, half-half...[the meaning of which] comes very close to what we call equity”. And among the

Tarahumara, “respect for the property of others is the keystone of all interpersonal relations”.

‘Morality as cooperation’ does not predict that moral values will be identical across cultures. On the contrary, the theory predicts ‘variation on a theme’: moral values will reflect the value of different types of cooperation under different social and ecological conditions. And certainly, it was our impression that these societies did indeed vary in how they prioritized or ranked the seven moral values. With further research, perhaps gathering new data on moral values in contemporary societies, we shall be able to explore the causes of this variation.

And so there is a common core of universal moral principles. Morality is always and everywhere a cooperative phenomenon. And everyone agrees that cooperating, promoting the common good, is the right thing to do. Appreciating this fundamental fact about human nature could help promote mutual understanding between people of different cultures, and so help to make the world a better place.

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A Universal Principle Within Morality's Ultimate Source

by Mark Sloan

There is a dilemma that must be solved by all beings that form highly cooperative societies. This dilemma is how to obtain the benefits of cooperation without future benefits being destroyed by exploitation, such as by free riders accepting a benefit but not reciprocating. Solving the cooperation/exploitation dilemma is difficult because exploitation is virtually always the 'winning' strategy in the short term and can be in the longer term.

Fortunately for us, our ancestors came across solutions that have enabled us to become the incredibly successful social species we are. Evolution encoded some of these solutions in our moral sense and cultural moral codes as "morality". The science of the last 50 years or so reveals human morality to be elements of cooperation strategies^{2,3,4,5,9} which have made us "SuperCooperators"⁶.

Cultural moralities are solutions to the cooperation/exploitation dilemma, but they are also diverse, contradictory, and sometimes strange. Exploitation of out-groups (such as slaves, women, and "others") has been common. Strange markers of being a moral person such as circumcision, dress and hairstyle, and food and sex taboos have been required.

Could there be a universally moral subset of these "descriptively moral" behaviors (behaviors described as moral in one culture but perhaps not in others)? Even when cooperating to exploit or make war⁸ on out-groups, we must necessarily begin by solving the cooperation/exploitation dilemma

within an in-group. To sustainably obtain these benefits of cooperation, people within this in-group "circle of moral concern"⁷ are not exploited.

This defines a universal moral principle: "Solve the cooperation/exploitation dilemma without exploiting others in your circle of moral concern". This principle is universal because it is a necessary component of all cultural moralities, even sub-cultures which restrict in-groups to family or friends and exploit everyone else. We can simplify this universal principle as "Increase the benefits of cooperation without exploiting others", leaving "others" undefined for the moment.

This universal moral principle is an attractive reference for refining moral codes to better meet shared needs and preferences. It advocates increased cooperation which both increases material goods benefits and triggers the emotional rewards evolution encoded that motivate further cooperation. Because our moral sense was selected for by the benefits of cooperation, these cooperation strategies are innately harmonious with our moral sense. This moral principle is practical. Following common moral norms such as the Golden Rule is universally moral when the benefits of cooperation are increased. But when following such norms would not solve the cooperation/exploitation dilemma, as when dealing with criminals and in wartime, following them would not be moral. Since this universal moral principle defines only moral 'means' (actions that increase cooperation's benefits

without exploiting others) and is silent on moral 'ends' (what those benefits are), societies are free to define what those benefits of cooperation ought to be and change them as circumstances change. The universal moral principle also sheds light on the morality of two human invented solutions to the cooperation/exploitation dilemma: money economies (which efficiently enable cooperation that produces material goods) and rule of law (which effectively uses force to punish exploiters).

friends, and community. Also, cultural moral norms are best understood not as moral absolutes but as heuristics (usually reliable, but fallible, rules of thumb) for sustainably increasing the benefits of cooperation. Further, if "others" are defined as all people, then all 'moral' norms that exploit out-groups contradict the universal moral principle. These include economic systems based on the unfettered pursuit of self-interest leading to exploitation and prohibitions against homosexuality that exploit homosexuals as

... properly understood, morality is not a burden; it is an effective means for increasing the benefits of cooperation, especially emotional well-being resulting from sustained cooperation with family, friends, and community.

Finally, because universally moral means are accurately tracked, this moral principle is a useful objective reference for resolving many moral disputes. (Disputes can persist about how "others", "exploiting", ultimate moral 'ends', and other implementation details are defined even among people who accept the principle.)

Individuals can benefit from this science by realizing that, properly understood, morality is not a burden; it is an effective means for increasing the benefits of cooperation, especially emotional well-being resulting from sustained cooperation with family,

imaginary threats. This purely science-based definition of what 'is' universally moral appears to be culturally useful independent of any arguments for mysterious¹ sources of obligation or moral authority.

However, the principle does not answer all moral questions. What benefits for acting morally ought we seek and who ought to be included in "others" who are not to be exploited? Common preferences might be "increased well-being" and "everyone". But here objective science goes silent; answers to these questions are in the domain of moral philosophy.

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 10627 Machrihanish Circle
San Antonio, FL 33576
(813) 435-3534