

# What is Morality?

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## 1 Introduction

Morality has the following components:

- Collective values.
- The individual internalization of collective values.
- The assumption that collective values are objective, and thus “moral”.
- A folk theory of morality.
- Individual and collective moral myths.

To understand morality, you need to understand how these components fit together into a system. In this essay, I will describe each component and how it relates to the others.

## 2 Collective Values

As individuals, we naturally make value judgments about what is good or bad for ourselves. For example, a man might want to marry a beautiful woman. He views that outcome as good for

himself. In other words, he values it positively. Individual values define what the individual views as good for himself and bad for himself.

Individual values are perspective-dependent. They are tied to the perspective of an individual. Different people make different value judgments.

Individual values are often in conflict, because people compete for resources and mates. For example, if two men want to marry the same woman, their individual values are in conflict. Each wants a different outcome. Each positively values the outcome in which he marries the woman, and negatively values the outcome in which the other man marries the woman. They make opposing value judgments about those outcomes.

Although individual values may be in conflict, individuals can find ways to cooperate for their mutual benefit.

For example, people who depend on a stream for drinking water could agree to protect its water quality, because they have a common preference for clean water. By itself, that common preference is not sufficient to create cooperation. They need to solve a problem of cooperation — a tragedy of the commons. (See Game Theory and Society.)

People can also find ways of competing that are less destructive. For example, two men who want the same woman could agree to let her choose between them, instead of fighting over her.

Collective values define what is good or bad for a collective. “Polluting our water supply is bad” is an example of a collective value judgment. It prohibits an individual behavior that is harmful to the collective. Collective values are tied to the perspective of a collective, rather than the perspective of an individual. Collective values emerge from the interplay of individual values in a social context. They represent solutions to problems of cooperation. “Do not murder” solves a prisoner’s dilemma. “Don’t pollute the water supply” solves a tragedy of the commons.

Collective values don’t solve problems of cooperation by themselves. Incentives are necessary to impose “good” behavior on individuals. Collective values merely define “good” and “bad” from a collective perspective. But that is a very important function. Collective values are necessary for society, but not sufficient.

Collective values arise out of individual selfishness, not altruism. Cooperation is selfish. Society benefits its members, and so they have an incentive to create and maintain it. Most people are willing to give up the freedom to kill others for protection from being killed by others. Most people are willing to sacrifice the convenience of polluting the water supply for the benefit of clean water. Collective values arise out of individual values, but do not directly reflect them, because they resolve conflicts between individual values. (Again, see Game Theory and Society.)

Collective values emerge naturally out of social interaction and communication. In that way, they are analogous to language. People didn’t sit down one day and make up the English language. It emerged. A tacit agreement on how to use words emerged out of our attempts to communicate. Collective values also emerge by tacit agreement. We discover values that work for us, as a collective, and those values become generally accepted. Collective values are created by agreement, and they exist in the same way that language exists: as part of culture.

### **3 Internalization**

Children acquire moral knowledge subconsciously from their social and family environments. They learn what they are supposed to do, allowed to do, and not supposed to do. The child learns that some acts are “bad” and others are “good”, and that “bad” acts are punished while “good” acts are rewarded.

Moral knowledge is not instinctive. It is acquired knowledge of collective values. Of course, it depends on instincts. Without instinctive desires, there would be no value judgments at all. Moral judgments are associated with certain emotions, such as guilt, shame and pride. But morality does not arise directly from emotions. The individual has to learn the morality of his social environment. Also, the apparently moral emotions have selfish functions. Guilt is fear of punishment. Shame is fear of rejection. Pride is the expectation of reward. These feelings reflect tacit knowledge of social incentives.

Morality is somewhat arbitrary. There are some common and stable moral values, because the same problems of cooperation exist in most times and places. But morality is not universal and unchanging. Societies develop different moral values, because they have different forms of social organization and different histories. Individuals develop different moral values, because they acquire moral knowledge from different people, they have different personality traits, and they have different personal experiences and problems. Moral values are adaptations, and so they are shaped by the environment at both the social level and the individual level.

Moral judgments are mostly intuitive. People are aware of their moral judgments, as “That’s good” or “That’s bad”, but they’re not aware of the underlying basis of their judgments. They can’t explain why they view some things as good and others as bad. They assume that they can recognize real goodness and badness, in the same way that they can perceive real objects and events. Few people question this assumption, or wonder what moral goodness and badness really are.

### **4 The Objectivity Assumption**

The objectivity assumption is the belief that certain collective values and imperatives are objective/cosmic. In this view, good and bad are objective properties of agents, intentions and actions. We have the (presumably innate) ability to recognize moral good and bad, and we have a cosmic imperative to be morally good, not bad.

There is some truth to this view, but not a lot. Morality is objective in the sense that collective values have an objective existence, and they are not tied to the perspective of a single individual. However, collective values are tied to the perspective of a collective. Moral value judgments do not reflect objective values. They reflect collective values.

Value is not an objective property of agents, intentions and actions. Value is projected onto agents, intentions and actions by individuals and collectives.

In the ordinary view of morality, there is a cosmic perspective (a “God’s eye view”) from which things are good or bad. And yet, the individual also has this cosmic perspective within himself, as “the conscience”. He has internal access to a source of correct moral judgments. He is somehow compelled to be good, but also recognizes a distinction between his own interests and moral values.

This view is contradictory. If morality is internal to us, then it is subjective and perspective dependent. If morality is external to us, then we are free to reject it internally, and it must be imposed on us by external forces.

Although the ordinary view of morality is incoherent, it does partially reflect the actual nature of the relationship between the individual and collective values. Collective values are not objective, but they are “above” the individual level, and the individual has internalized this “higher” perspective to some extent. In making decisions, he often has to resolve conflicts between individual values and collective values.

The ordinary view of morality includes the notion of objective moral rights and obligations, which are analogous to socially constructed rights and obligations, such as property and laws. Moral rights and obligations are presumed to be binding on us, regardless of social context. Morality contains the assumption that we have an obligation to be morally good and not morally bad. Likewise, it assumes that we have a right to be treated in a morally good way.

Again, this doesn’t make much sense. These rights and obligations supposedly exist in objective reality (how? where?) and we are supposed to accept them as subjectively imperative for ourselves, regardless of their ability to be enforced (why?).

The objectivity assumption is clearly false. “Objective value” is an oxymoron. Value judgments cannot be perspective independent. Value does not exist in objectivity. It is projected onto objectivity by subjects. The same is true for rights and obligations. They exist only within a social context. There are no rights or obligations in nature. The objectivity assumption confuses a collective perspective with a universal perspective.

## 5 Folk Theory

Morality includes a simple folk theory of how people make moral judgments. People are assumed to have some internal ability to recognize moral good and bad. This ability is called “the conscience”.

Most folk theories don’t explain what the conscience is, but some try to. Humanism tries to explain the conscience as due to empathy and compassion. Supposedly, we evolved empathy and compassion, and those traits make us altruistic. To the humanist, moral goodness equals altruism. So, they believe that humans are intrinsically good by nature, and this also gives us the capacity to recognize moral goodness and badness in others.

There are some half-truths buried in this view. We evolved to be cooperative as well as competitive, but not altruistic. In other words, we evolved to be social. We do have the capacity for empathy. But we also have the capacity for negative empathy (hatred), and both types of empathy have selfish functions. They evolved to make us cooperate in some cases, and compete in others. (See Altruism and Selfishness.) Certainly, humans did not evolve psychological mechanisms to produce the moral values that humanists profess. The human form did not evolve to be altruistic. It evolved to reproduce.

The conscience can be understood as the internalization of moral values. It is not an innate ability to recognize objective good and evil. It is acquired knowledge of collective values. An individual’s moral goodness or badness depends on two things: (1) how deeply he has internalized the collective values of his society, and (2) the strength of the social incentives in his environment.

The folk theory of morality is confusing when it comes to why people are immoral. On the one

hand, it assumes that people have innate knowledge of moral values, and that those values are both objectively and subjectively normative. On the other hand, it assumes that individuals have the freedom, and occasionally the desire, to be immoral.

Presumably, an agent is good if she desires to be good, and evil if she either desires to be evil or has an insufficient desire to be good. In this view, the desire to be good (or evil) is subjective. A good person has their subjective value judgments aligned with moral values, while the evil person's subjective values are not aligned with moral values, and may be opposed to them. This adds a personal, subjective component (the desire to be good or evil) to the conscience (knowledge of good and evil).

The folk theory recognizes but doesn't explain the distinction between individual values and moral values. It is confused about whether moral value judgments come from within us or are imposed on us. The conscience is viewed as both internal and external, as both something within us and something that we struggle with.

This doesn't make sense. If moral knowledge is innate, why would we make a distinction between moral values and individual values?

The truth is that moral values are imposed on us by social power, even if we agree to them. We internalize those values as moral knowledge, and that gives us the ability to make moral judgments. However, we still recognize a distinction between moral values and individual values, because they have a different underlying basis.

## **6 Individual Moral Myths**

The objectivity assumption and the folk theory conflict with the reality of human nature and morality. People use moral myths to deal with these conflicts. Moral myths involve false claims about internal motivations and external behavior. Moral myths hide the reality of human nature behind a pretense of moral goodness. They also support the individual's advocacy for his own interests within the collective. The individual pretends to be more internally aligned with collective values than he actually is. He also tries to align collective values with his individual values whenever possible.

Almost every individual claims to be morally good. He claims (and believes) that he would not steal, rape or murder even if he could get away with it. He claims and believes that moral goodness is built into his soul or character. He has a myth about his own motivations, and this myth often extends to his actions as well. He hides bad behavior and displays good behavior. This usually involves self-deception. He believes in his moral goodness, and is not aware of his hypocrisy. He hides his bad behavior not only from others, but also from himself with post hoc rationalizations. The pretense of moral goodness requires many little lies.

Being selfish, the individual naturally advocates for his own interests within the social environment. He tries to maximize his benefits and rights, while minimizing his costs and responsibilities. Much of this advocacy involves appealing to moral values.

Self-advocacy has two aspects:

- Arguing that one is morally good (or not morally bad) and thus deserving of rewards (or not deserving of punishments).

For example, an accused criminal might argue that he is innocent and should be released.

- Arguing for collective values that are aligned with one's own interests.

For example, a poor man might promote charity as a collective value, while a rich man might promote self-reliance as a collective value.

Somewhat ironically, individuals use moral myths to compete with other individuals for the resources of society. The pretense of goodness is a claim to moral status, and moral status confers benefits. People compete for moral status by establishing their personal claim to goodness, while undermining the claims of others. Advocacy is a selfish competition for resources. It often becomes organized around competing ideologies and even competing moralities. Political conflicts are often moral conflicts based on competing moral myths.

Collective values solve problems of cooperation, but they also create a new arena of competition and new problems of cooperation. Even if we collectively agree to a cooperation scheme, there is still an incentive to defect on the scheme or rig it in your favor, if you can get away with it. Self-advocacy is a tragedy of the commons.

## 7 Collective Moral Myths

Like the individual, society also has a myth of its moral goodness. Every society has a myth of its objective goodness within nature and the cosmos. Every society views its existence as having some great cosmic/historical purpose. This claim is a way of justifying its existence and what it must do to exist.

Like individuals, societies are selfish. Societies exist within nature, and they need to extract resources from nature. That involves the large-scale killing of other life-forms and the destruction of ecosystems. Societies also compete with other societies. This competition takes place outside the boundaries of society, so it is not governed by the rules of society. It is governed by the rules of nature.

A society cannot obey the rules and norms that it imposes on its members. For example, societies generally prohibit murder (killing other members of the society), but fight wars in which they try to kill members of other societies. If a society pretends that its collective values are objective, then it must be hypocritical. It must be evil, while imposing goodness on its members. This requires a moral double standard.

The double standard is typically justified with myths. Societies have myths that justify a moral distinction between insiders and outsiders. Competing societies are labeled "evil" to justify acts of violence against them. Humanity is placed above the rest of nature in a cosmic hierarchy, to justify the extraction of resources from nature. Finally, the internal order of society is portrayed as being objectively good, perhaps because it comes from God (e.g. the ten commandments) or because it consists of "self-evident truths" (e.g. the US declaration of independence).

These myths are collaborative self-deceptions. The members of society believe its myths because of conformity and obedience. The myths are used to signal virtue to other members of society. If you question them, you risk becoming a moral outsider and being cast out of society.

## 8 Conclusion

Morality is like a layer cake. The first layer consists of collective values. The second layer is the internalization of those values by the individual. The third layer is the objectivity assumption. The fourth layer is the folk theory of morality. Individual and collective moral myths are the icing and decorations on top.

The first two layers are hidden from the awareness of the ordinary person. He is affected by them but does not understand them. He knows collective values only through his subconscious internalization of them.

Everything above internalization is deception or delusion.

We need collective values for society to function, and individuals will naturally internalize those values. We do not need the layers above internalization. We could replace the objectivity assumption and everything above it with a realistic and pragmatic theory of the individual and his relation to society. That would eliminate morality as such.

We should eliminate morality and replace it with a rational theory of the individual and society.