

Why I'm an Amoralist

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Introduction: The Transition from Theism to Atheism Was a Framework Transition

Theism was central to human thought from the very beginning of recorded history. From our earliest texts, it's evident that humans viewed the world through a framework of powerful persons shaping nature to their purposes and requesting specified behaviour in return. Not until the 18th century did this framework begin to come under serious challenge, as a mounting body of scientific evidence offered a plausible alternative for the first time. Since then, theism has gradually declined in popularity in favour of an atheistic framework where nature is described entirely through impersonal physical regularities.

In hindsight, it's easy to see why theism was so dominant for so long. Humans evolved mechanisms for dealing with social situations, which are the most complex things we encounter in our daily lives, and those mechanisms include frameworks that allow us to parse social situations effectively. We assign intentions to other people, categorise their moods, and project their expectations for us. This forms the basis for much of human thought and action. It's understandable that humans, when faced with complexities in nature, would attempt to apply the same type of framework.

It's important not to overlook the role frameworks play in intellectual development. Without observations, of course, there is no content to our beliefs, but we order those observations through frameworks. No amount of observations of an erupting volcano automatically shifts our categorisation from 'angry' to 'magma discharge'. The observations must be accompanied by a shift in framework from one set of categories to another. With theism, it appears our frameworks shifted gradually through a succession of increasingly impersonal frameworks; from pantheism to polytheism to monotheism to atheism.

This brings us to morality. There are two interesting things about the transition from theism to atheism here. The first is that morality was closely tied to theism, being defined historically as the behaviour which the powerful persons requested of humans. This means that the transition from theism to atheism left an explanatory gap; how do we define morality if there are no persons in nature to request behaviour of us and punish us for disobeying?

The second is the extent to which morality, like theism, is tied to a specific framework, and consequently cannot be properly addressed at the level of observations. Frameworks order our observations. This means that observations alone cannot change our frameworks. They can suggest that we need a better framework, if they accumulate in a way that appears awkward, but they cannot themselves change the framework; that requires conceptual work. So the first question we need to ask is: does morality, like theism, work through a framework?

Morality, Like Theism, is a Framework for Categorising Observations

Consider a few typical moral situations: 1) I see someone push an old lady aside and I say 'that is wrong', 2) I see someone donate to charity and I say 'that is good', 3) I see a homeless man and I say 'that is an injustice', 4) I see an unpleasant person get into trouble and I say 'that is just', 5) I see a financial crisis and I point to the banks and say 'they are responsible', 6) I see people living in poverty and I say 'they are victims'.

To make things more straightforward, I've described these situations in a way that distinguishes observation from moral judgement. This makes it simpler to identify the framework by examining the judgement. In reality, morality takes on a variety of forms, and isn't always as straightforward as these situations. For our purpose here, though, I think they suffice.

So, what can we say about our moral judgements? There seems to be a clear pattern: they are all variations of legal terms. More accurately, they seem to fit into three category pairs, which conform to the way a court functions. First, there are terms that refer to compliance to a defined set of laws, and are essentially synonymous: right/wrong, good/evil, and virtue/vice. Second, there are terms that refer to the assignment of guilt, also synonymous: guilty/innocent, responsible/irresponsible, and perpetrator/victim. Finally, there are terms that refer to the appropriate measure of punishment: justice/injustice, and fairness/unfairness.

This is so accurate, I think, that we can *define* the first part of morality accordingly: morality is the categorisation of observations according to a court framework.

It certainly makes sense to be suspicious of this, because it's not clear which court, if any, we're referring to. But as we saw with theism, we can't just stop using a framework, we have to replace it with another framework. But how do we figure out which one? We first need to identify which observations we're referring to. What are we *trying to* describe through our moral framework? This is not immediately obvious, since there are so many diverse moral situations. Let's consider some theories.

Theory #1: Morality Describes Individual Preferences

One common theory, which has become more popular with the growth of atheism, is that morality describes our individual preferences. There is some appeal to this, because it's clear that people with different personality types, for example, sometimes reach different moral judgements. However, there are two problems.

First, it doesn't seem to make any sense to describe our individual preferences through a court framework. We can prefer summer to winter, or strawberry to vanilla. But it doesn't make sense to describe these preferences as wrong or guilty or unjust. It seems implausible that people would ever start using a court framework to categorise individual preferences. Why would they? And it seems even more implausible that such a categorisation would become almost universal across a variety of different human societies.

Second, there's the problem of moral knowledge. If morality was a categorisation of our individual preferences, it's unclear how religion could work the way it does, where people look to priests or scripture for moral guidance. The same applies to the way children are typically raised, being taught moral judgements by their parents. In all these situations, there appears to be communication of information about the world, not just teaching people about their own preferences.

Theory #2: Morality Describes Social Norms

A second common theory is that morality describes the social norms of a given society. This appears to solve the problems of the first theory. It *does* make some sense to categorise behaviour as wrong or guilty or unjust relative to the social norms of that society. And it explains how religion and children's moral education work: they teach the social norms of their society. And because social norms can vary among societies, it explains why different societies have different moralities, for example that some societies regard conquest as highly virtuous, while others don't.

This is better, but it still doesn't completely solve the problem of moral knowledge. Consider the case of people in the 18th century arguing that slavery is morally wrong. If morality were just a description of a society's norms, it's difficult to make sense of this. Or consider the case where a society voluntarily adopts another society's morality. For example, there were several occasions in European history where conquering pagan nations adopted the Christian beliefs of the nations they conquered. Similarly, in the 18th century, France rapidly adopted a number of wide-ranging social changes, inspired by occurrences in England.

All these situations suggest that people are able to hold the social norms of their society up against something else. There doesn't seem to be any other way to explain how they would prefer another society's norms over their own when exposed to them. There must be some standard they are comparing them both to in deciding which one they prefer, something that extends beyond their own social norms.

Theory #3: Morality Describes a Society's Relation to its Environment

The apparent existence of moral knowledge motivated us to move from morality as a description of individual preferences to morality as a description of the social norms of an entire society, yet it seems that this is not enough. It appears that we must move to something larger than an individual society. But what?

Let's consider how morality arose. This stretches back far beyond recorded history, so there is no way to know for sure, but there are some clues, at least. First, as mentioned previously, it seems that morality has historically been closely tied to the belief in powerful persons in nature. They set the laws for human behaviour and punished breaches. It also seems clear that earlier theistic systems were less abstract and thus more closely tied to natural objects than later systems. Volcanoes required humans to pay tribute, and erupted if they didn't. Buffalo required humans to hunt sparingly, and withheld offering themselves up for food if they didn't.

This seems to suggest the answer we're looking for. Morality is not a categorisation of behaviour according to individual preferences, nor to a society's social norms, but to its relation to its *environment*. Social norms follow from this relation, and individual preferences follow from social norms. Which explains why humans would adopt a court framework. When combined with a belief that nature is full of persons, it's easy to see why this would also extend to ascribing it court-like properties, inferred from simple human tribunal processes.

It also explains why morality is so universal. Just as theism is the extension of a social framework to nature, so morality can be seen as the extension of a tribunal framework to nature. Of course, it's possible that both theism and morality evolved in a single human society and then spread, but it's not an amazing coincidence if it didn't. It seems quite plausible that almost any human society, given how central a social framework is to human behaviour, would develop some kind of theistic, moral framework when faced with the complex and punishing nature of its environment.

And this explains why societies would sometimes voluntarily replace their social norms with others, and also why people within a society may rebel against the norms of their society: the standard they are comparing their social norms to is their environment. (Which may, of course, include other human societies.) This *is* moral knowledge; information about a society's environment interpreted through a court framework.

Definition of Morality and Examples

We can now articulate a full definition: morality is the use of a court framework to structure the relation of a society to its environment into laws, responsibilities, and appropriate measures of justice, and within which human behaviour is evaluated.

Let's see how this works through a few examples.

A pantheistic society learns over time that overhunting buffalo leads to scarcity, which leads to starvation. It doesn't possess the modern framework that we would use to describe the situation, so it develops a moral framework that fits into its general theistic framework: the buffalo request that humans do not overhunt, and if they do the buffalo become angry and refuse to offer themselves up for food. Overhunting is wrong (it breaks the moral law), while hunting carefully does not. If humans are responsible for breaking the law, the buffalo serve justice by not offering themselves up for food. In this situation, what we would describe as a 'requirement of nature' (not overhunting) is interpreted through a moral framework, which then carries through to social norms and individual preferences (individual members of society feel that overhunting is wrong).

A monotheistic Jewish society learns over time that eating pork leads to severe illness or death. It doesn't possess the knowledge of germs that we would use to describe the situation, so it develops a moral framework that fits into its general theistic framework: God requests that humans don't eat pork, and becomes angry if they do and punishes them with illness or death. Eating pork is wrong, and this is enforced through social norms and carries through to individual preferences (people 'feel guilty' if they eat pork, i.e., they feel that they have broken a moral law). What we in modern terms would describe as a requirement of nature (not eating pork because pigs carried lots of germs then) is interpreted through a moral framework.

A modern secular society discovers that industrialisation has led to poor working conditions in factories and is creating unrest. It continues to use a moral framework for historical reasons, even after having relinquished its theistic beliefs, so it describes this through what's left of a moral framework: inequality is 'wrong' and justice occurs when it is corrected. Social norms follow from this, and individual preferences from these (people 'feel guilty' about inequality, i.e., they feel

that they have broken a moral law). This can still function like the earlier moral frameworks, as long as people don't question it too deeply.

Of course, moral laws do not arise suddenly to describe particular problems. They carry over from earlier moral systems. There's no question, for example, that modern secular morality inherited a lot from earlier Christian beliefs. Nevertheless, we can see how morality transforms to fit new societal problems. For example, there has clearly been a shift over the past few centuries, undoubtedly associated with increased urbanisation due to industrialisation, away from an individualistic view of morality and towards a collective view, which has increasingly resulted in the use of 'society' as a moral agent. Thus, for example, one can say that it is an 'injustice' that a person is poor or homeless, not necessarily because of the actions of any individual person, but rather due to the actions of society as a whole. This surely is an adaptation to the fact that human interactions are different in an industrialised society. We still use the *framework* of a legal system, though.

Morality is not the Best Method for Doing What It Does

Having satisfied ourselves that these examples demonstrate that our definition of morality is accurate, we can move on to the next question. We first determined that morality was the application of a moral framework to order observations, but until we knew what those observations were, we couldn't say anything about whether a court framework is the best framework for doing so. We now have: the observations we are ordering are those pertaining to the relation between a society and its environment. So, is a court framework the best framework for ordering these observations? The answer, in my opinion, is no.

We have better frameworks, for example in economics. Take communism. Communist societies have consistently experienced disastrous results. From a moral perspective, this is difficult to explain. Morality played a significant role in the argument *for* communism, more specifically the belief that inequality is morally wrong. So how does one explain its failure? One could try to adopt a *different* morality in trying to explain communism's failures, for example the libertarian perspective that it is morally wrong to seize private property. The explanation then is that communism fails because it is *evil*. But few people accept libertarianism in all situations, so then you have to account for exceptions. You also have to tie this into functional descriptions about human society. And you have to accept morality as a bald assertion, meaning that it cannot be justified further. And, of course, if you're an atheist, you have to explain why you are using a court framework without believing that an actual cosmic court exists.

Contrast that with the explanation proposed by economist Ludwig von Mises. He explained that communism must fail, because a communist society lacks something critical: information. Communism eliminates trade, since it removes private property and tells people where to work. But when people trade they aren't just trading products and labour, they're also trading information about their preferences, and when this no longer occurs there's no way for producers to know what to make, and so eventually you end up with a society where people's desires are unfulfilled and there's a spiral into misery. And people's desires aren't arbitrary, they have evolved to form a system.

In this sense, society is analogous to an organism like the human body. Humans have evolved behaviour that combines to form a system able to continuously address environmental pressures as they occur through the transfer of resources and information. Eliminating trade shuts down the system, except for a few top-down pathways. This means that environmental pressures aren't addressed and build up in the system until it collapses. The human body is a calibrated system of functions that have evolved to address environmental pressures as they occur, thus keeping the body healthy. The same applies to a human society. A moral framework based on moral laws and measures of justice can't possibly describe the complexities of a human societal system in the way that a functional framework can. There's a level of sophistication in a functional framework that simply doesn't exist in a moral framework. There is no need to appeal to morality here; it's purely descriptive, and all of it verifiable, at least in principle.

Other social sciences offer similar frameworks, and evolutionary theory is also a powerful functional framework, although one that works in the longer term.

A Functional Framework Allows Us to Easily Solve Persistent Moral Problems

Not only can we better address particular examples with a functional framework rather than a moral framework, but we can solve persistent moral problems as well.

Take the relativism vs. universalism problem. A persistent belief in moral philosophy has been that moral statements need to be universal, in other words that they must apply to everyone in all situations. Yet, studies of different societies, both in ancient and modern times, have revealed major differences in moral beliefs between societies. In other words, moral beliefs appear to be relative to different societies. This seems problematic. If morality is relative to a person or society, then, as we saw previously, moral knowledge is impossible, and we can never judge other people's morality against our own. Yet, if morality is universal, then at least some societies' morality must be wrong. But wrong relative to what? Evolutionary theory resolves this easily. Societies have different environments, and thus develop different moralities accordingly. Moralities are relative. But environments, and their relation to human societies, adhere to physical laws, and *these* are universal. This is quite typical for physical descriptions, perhaps the best known being Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Distances are relative to each observer, and there is no privileged position, but spacetime intervals are universal.

Consider another moral problem: individualism vs. collectivism. An argument in moral philosophy, dating back at least to Plato and Aristotle, has been about whether morality is about furthering the goals of individuals or collectives. (Not to be confused with the previous question; individualist moralities can be stated universally, e.g., 'everyone should maximise their own happiness', and collectivist moralities can be relative to particular societies.) Evolutionary theory also easily resolves this problem. Humans act individually, but they have evolved collective behaviour that is part of their desires. It is neither possible nor necessary to separate them.

A third problem, somewhat related to both the previous problems, is the class problem. The question is whether different moralities apply to different members of a society, and if so how one determines it. It has been a common feature across human societies to categorise people into groups and hold them to different moralities: priests, kings, slaves, children, men, women, and others. Evolutionary theory, and to a lesser degree, economics, answers this easily. Society specialises into classes when this allows it to better deal with its environment. The most obvious being men and women, which is a long-term specialisation of behaviour. There's no need to try to fit this into a moral framework; it's much better explained through a functional framework based on science.

Possible Objections

The most common objection when someone tries to bridge the apparent gap between moral- and descriptive statements is logical: the *naturalistic fallacy*, also known as *David Hume's is-ought problem*. This problem, I believe, is widely misunderstood, because it conflates morality with agency (or if one prefers, normativity). Moral statements describe the relation between a society and its environment, with the environment originally being thought of as having personhood and acting like a legislator and judge. In other words, morality is external to the decisionmaker; it's information about the world. There's nothing structurally different about the statements 'stealing is wrong' and 'stealing leads to social instability', except that in the first case the consequences of a breach are unstated. Neither of these statements are normative. In both cases, one must separately add the statement 'I shouldn't steal'.

The reason for the confusion, I think, is that the term 'wrong' is often implicitly *defined* as 'I shouldn't', thus conflating the two terms. This is an error, in my opinion. It seemingly stems from a desire that originated in late Christianity to make morality *logically necessary*. Theologians were not satisfied with morality being laws determined and judged by God, as had traditionally been the belief. They wanted morality to be part of a logical system, in accordance with the rationalist spirit of the time. Stealing is not just wrong because God says so; it's wrong by logical necessity and can be stated in a logical proof. This idea has carried over to later secular philosophy. In fact, with the disappearance of God it seems to have become even more prominent. The desire is for a 'cheat sheet'; a logical proof for certain human behaviour. This, I think, is asking too much of morality. Like most rationalist approaches that seek logical necessity, all it does is conflate two terms; what appears to be logical necessity is really tautology. And like most rationalist approaches, this just leads to confusion and does nothing to advance actual knowledge.

There *is* a genuine agency problem, related to how we align normative and descriptive statements, which arguably leads into the mind/body problem; the central problem in philosophy. (A possible answer could be that normative statements are projections of behaviour, based on incomplete information, since this is the way the words 'should' and 'ought' are used in other contexts. There are still problems with this answer, though.) But there is no need to conflate morality with this problem.

A second objection, closely related to the first, is practical: that replacing moral statements with descriptive statements changes how people approach decisions, because descriptive statements are not *binding* in a way that moral statements are. The idea is that moral statements have some type of special status. (Albeit one that philosophers struggle to define; it's a *feeling* that moral statements are special in some sense.) This, I think, is just a consequence of conflating morality with agency, resulting in an implicit assumption that there is some kind of hypothetical moral statement that describes logical necessity for human action, yet which humans somehow do not necessarily act according to. Once one untangles morality and agency one realises that this is nonsense. Moral statements have no special status; they are statements of functional relations between behaviour and consequence. Whether they are set by God or by a society's environment doesn't change their basic structure, so there's no reason it should fundamentally change the decision-making process. Besides, the idea of logical necessity in human decision-making is anachronistic; a vestige of a pre-scientific view of human behaviour.

A third possible objection is emotional: that something is lost by replacing moral statements with descriptive statements. The idea is that there's a certain magic to moral statements that descriptive statements don't possess; that the power of moral statements is in their irreducibility. This is essentially the same argument as one might make against atheism; that replacing person(s) with impersonal physical regularities makes the world less exciting. This is true to a degree, I think, but it's irrelevant. If persons in nature don't exist, then they don't exist. And likewise, if a cosmic court doesn't exist, then it doesn't exist.

Conclusion: Why I'm Not an Amoralist

And this brings us, finally, to the initial topic: amoralism.

I consider myself an amoralist because I reject the use of a court framework to describe the environmental relations of a society, in the same way that I consider myself an atheist because I reject the use of a person-based framework for describing nature. These two things are not only historically related, their rejection follows the same path: the replacement of an anachronistic, anthropomorphic framework with one based on science.

In practice, that means reframing moral statements in functional terms. Whether amoralism ultimately becomes the norm is a question of utility: are functional frameworks able to make better predictions about the world, including human behaviour, than moral frameworks? I believe that they are, and that this will be increasingly confirmed in the future.