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Socially Adjustable Morality:
A Neo-Functional Account

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Abstract

   Morality has always been contentious. Thus, in recent years, absolutists have been aligned against relativists. Both sides, however, are mistaken about the nature of morality. Absolutists come in many varieties, which include: the religious, the naturalist, the philosophical, the Marxist, and the scientific. Meanwhile, relativists are divided into social and individual camps. Opposed to both groups are the moral nihilists who may be classified as nice, nasty, and skeptical. Sadly, all miss the mark because they do not account for morality as it actually operates. A "socially adjustable" model fits the facts much better. It describes morality as consisting of 1) informal rules that are paradigmatically transmitted, 2) created via polarized social negotiations, and 3) maintained through the agency of intense emotions such as anger, guilt, shame, and disgust. Together these explain how morality can be simultaneously stable and changeable. They also elucidate the manner in which morality controls important social conflicts.

The Problem

   Morality is forever under contention. Disagreements about what is right and wrong are eternal. Ever since there have been moral judgments, we have evidence of differences of opinion. But more than this, there have been vehement quarrels about what is morally correct and just as importantly about "who" is the right or wrong. Whether these disputes were between Christians and Gnostics, Roman aristocrats or Chinese grandees, people have argued about what is sexually permissible or politically just. They have even gone to war to determine which conclusions would prevail.

   Our times, of course, are no different. We too have our moral debates. Nowadays, politics, as opposed to religion, is most likely to be the venue in which these take place. More particularly, liberals and conservatives have very different conceptions of how people should behave (Hunter, 1991). Liberals are likely to be relativists who contend that morality is socially constructed and therefore determined by those to whom its rules apply, whereas conservatives are likely to be absolutists who are convinced that moral rules are eternal and therefore apply to everyone.

During the course of history countless sages have attempted to solve the riddle of morality. The goal has been a veritable philosopher's stone that would provide insights as pure as the purest gold. Some have looked for religious revelations that would elucidate God's will, while others, such as Immanuel Kant (1956), sought logical means of determining moral truth. Still others, including sociologists and ethologists, thought the answer would yield to scientific inquiry (Piaget, 1969; Kohlberg, 1981; Wilson, 1993; Wright, 1994; de Waal, 2006). Unfortunately, all have been frustrated. There is, as yet, no uniformly acceptable moral formulation.

And herein lies the problem. Why have so many intelligent and well-intentioned persons been thwarted in their moral endeavors? Some, to be sure, have been convinced they had the answer, but others have been equally convinced these putative authorities were wrong. Never have the many competing perceptions been fully reconciled. Nor has unanimous assent ever emerged. One might have imagined a universally satisfactory explanation would have been discovered by now, but it has not.

The question is therefore: Why is there no answer? Could it be that there is something about morality that precludes a definitive solution; something that makes it impossible for everyone to arrive at the same destination? A neo-functional sociological analysis of this conundrum suggests that there is indeed such a reason. The nature of morality, and more specifically its need to be socially adjustable, makes unanimous agreement is virtually impossible.

Absolutists versus Relativists

As suggested above, the current disputes center around the differences between absolutists and relativists. Each side, which largely parallels the squabbles between conservatives and liberals, is convinced that it is right and the other is wrong. Moreover, they do so with a passion that can be incandescent. Each points a recriminating finger and demands compliance with its vision. As predictably, adherents of both refuse to knuckle under.

Nevertheless, both are wrong. Let us begin with the absolutists. First off, they disagree among themselves. There is more than one variety of absolutism. These can roughly be divided into religious, naturalist, philosophical, Marxist, and scientific

categories. Each of these camps comes to a different conclusion, while each cites inconsistent reasons for favoring its respective position.

The religious absolutists are perhaps the easiest to explain (Armstrong, 1993; Kurtz, 2007). They believe in the existence of a deity who prescribes the moral standards with which we are all expected to comply. He/She defines the nature of morality such that it is invariable and supernaturally sanctioned. In its most familiar version, those who submit to God's will are rewarded by going to heaven when they die, while those who do not are condemned to everlasting hell. These choices are not up to human beings, but are decreed by a source over which we have little control.

The problem with this perspective, of course, is that not all religions agree about what is right. Nor do they agree on the means of enforcement. Thus, to cite one small example, not all religions evaluate sex the same way. To illustrate, the Shakers were convinced that sex in any form was sinful. For them the best life was one of complete celibacy. Orthodox Jews, however, disagree. They believe that sex is a gift from God and encourage married couples to indulge in it without fear of moral censure. Meanwhile, religious sanctions also vary. Buddhists, for instance, do not subscribe to anything similar to the Christian conception of heaven. Indeed, they believe the goal of life is eternal nothingness (Nirvana).

The "naturalist" perspective in many ways parallels the religious one. It finds moral rules, not specifically in a deity's commands, but in the way that the natural order is constructed. For many of them, the natural order is itself supernaturally constructed. Nevertheless they purport to search nature for evidence of moral rules. This is best epitomized by the Lockean version on natural law (Locke, 1959) as it was embodied in the U.S. Declaration of Independence. As most schoolchildren know, Jefferson wrote that some truths are "self-evident." Among these he cited the "fact" that everyone has a "right" to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The trouble with this point of view is that there is as little agreement about its prescriptions as those emanating from a deity. First, moral rules are not discovered by an empirical search of nature. Proscriptions against lying are not found by overturning rocks and then examining them under a microscope. In fact, no one looks for moral truths by

literally looking at nature. Rather they "intuit" these. Second, their intuitions are no more consistent than religious dictates. They too vary with who is doing the intuiting.

A third version of absolutism resides in philosophy. These moralists believe they can find invariant moral standards by employing their mental faculties. A host of scholars ranging from Plato (1941) to John Rawls (1971) believed they could reason their way to coherent moral conclusions. The problem here is that they have no more agreed among themselves than have the religious divines. They too speak with an authority that can sound convincing, nevertheless, philosophical solutions to moral dilemmas have changed with the regularity of fashions. As a result, today's reigning system is liable to be tomorrow's discarded fallacy.

Among the unsuccessful contenders, despite his continuing authority, has been Immanuel Kant (1956). He thought that employing "practical reason" inevitably produced a "categorical imperative." According to him, any rule that was not uniformly applicable to everyone was logically invalid. This, however, has not stopped intelligent persons from reaching inconsistent conclusions. Nor has G.E. Moore's (1960) insistence that "good" was an observable quality, much like the color yellow, settled the matter. The trouble is that people do not seem to "see" the same thing. Then there is Stephen Toulmin's (1960) argument that moral truths are established by a special form of moral reasoning which is akin to an Aristotlian syllogism (Aristotle, 1941). Unfortunately, once again people fail to arrive at the same answers. They disagree about the premises and/or the deductive principles and hence fail to arrive at the same place.

The Marxists promote a fourth version of absolutism. No doubt, they would vociferously deny this, yet their inflexibility in the face of disconfirming evidence argues against the scientific credentials they claim. Karl Marx (1967) believed he had discovered the secret of social progress. As opposed to the utopian socialists, he subscribed to dialectical materialism. Throughout history different social classes had clashed over who would control the economic means of production. In his day, the capitalists and proletarians squared off against each other, and it was the proletarians who destined to win. Then when they did, they would establish a dictatorship in which property would be abolished and complete social equality would become the norm.

Although some Marxists continue to make forecasts analogous to their mentor, most recognize that his predicted revolution did not occur on schedule. Nonetheless, they continue to make moral judgments analogous to his. They too portray working people as the "good guys" and business owners as the "bad" ones. Almost never acknowledged, however, is the moralism embedded in Marxist concepts. Thus, can there ever be "good" exploitation? Aren't "exploitation" and "oppression" inherently moral terms? And isn't the notion of "surplus value" equally moral? Certainly most market-oriented economists would argue that "profit" is a good thing. They do not find it equivalent to "parasitism."

A fifth, but not final, version of absolutism is the scientific. Contemporary ethologists allege to find the roots of morality in animal behavior (Pugh, 1977; Thomas, 1977)). They note that many species exhibit forms of interaction that foreshadow our own. Thus, chimpanzees engage in "rule" enforcement and "reconciliation" ceremonies. Frans de Waal (1996), in particular, has shown that among chimps alpha males often control unruly conduct within the band. They will physically break up fights and "discipline" those who disobey. They also "kiss and make up" with miscreants once the uproar has died down. In other words, bad behavior is "punished," while good behavior is rewarded.

All of this is allegedly based on close observations of various species. But socio-biologists go further than describe what they see. They typically hypothesize that morality derives from innate "altruistic" and/or "sympathetic" impulses (Trivers, 1971; Wilson, 1975; Dawkins, 1976). These are supposedly built into our genes and derive from a need to pass beneficial characteristics from one generation to the next. Actually, the central biological concern is delivering a specific individual's genetic code to his/her progeny. Here the problem is not with the attempt to be scientific, but rather with whether or not it succeeds. Are human beings inherently altruistic, thereby explaining the nature of our moral systems? At the very least, this theory does not elucidate disparities in moral judgment or conduct. At minimum, something more seems to be involved. In other words, current scientific models do not provide a fully developed theory of morality.

Let us now turn to the relativists (Westermarck, 1960, Rochon, 1998). They come in two primary flavors, the social and the individual, each of which denies that absolutism is correct. Moreover, both insist that there is no consistent moral code to which everyone must subscribe. But they go further. The social relativists claim that morality is socially constructed and is therefore validated within societies and never between them. In their view, each society defines the meaning of good and bad for itself and as a result cannot be wrong. What it establishes as correct cannot be disputed because the standards by which this is determined are created by the society itself. As a consequence, what is considered right in one community may be regarded wrong in another.

And yet the notion that inter-social judgments are invalid is itself a moral prescription. To assert that one cannot evaluate what another society believes is itself a moral stricture. But from whence does this rule come? Is it somehow constructed between societies? To be consistent, relativists would have to refrain from judging absolutists when they make unconditional claims. They would have to admit that because they believe this, it must be right for them.

In the real world, of course, this does not happen. Few relativists believe that because the Nazis considered Jews and Gypsies sub-human they had the right to eliminate them in concentration camps. Just because they defined racial purity as a moral imperative, did not make it so. Similarly, few contemporary Americans (even in the South) would say that because antebellum southerners considered slavery moral that it was. They would not agree that the North should have minded its own business on the grounds that slavery was a southern concern. Meanwhile, many self-proclaimed relativists are incensed by what they describe as genital mutilation. Although some societies subscribe to clitorectomies, relativists want these practices abolished. They may not live where this occurs, but they still believe they have a right to interfere based on their moral commitments.

The problem with ethical relativism is therefore that it is based on a false premise. Even if morality is socially constructed, there is no reason why people living in different societies cannot judge one another. Nor is there any reason they cannot meddle in their

respective internal affairs. Thus, Westerners have every right to dissuade Muslims from stoning adulteresses to death. They can even go to war to prevent genocide. Similarly, members of a single community can object to the standards to which most of their contemporaries subscribe. They do not need to acquiesce just because a majority of others, no matter how large, say this is what morality means. In fact, they can attempt to change the minds of these others.

In its most extreme version, namely the individual variety, ethical relativism asserts that every person has a right to determine what is right for him or herself. Observers like Alan Wolfe (2001) seem to tell us that everyone is his or her own moral authority; that no one can, or should, determine the contents of another person's conscience. But this is even more of a *reductio ad absurdum* than its inter-social predecessor. If everyone gets to decide what is right or wrong for him/herself, then presumably no one can ever be immoral. Each would only have to assert that a particular act is correct no matter what its content. Under this interpretation even murder would be acceptable, that is, as long as the murderer thought that it was the right thing to do.

In fact, morality is a social phenomenon. Individuals may differ as to what they find acceptable, but moral rules are socially enforced. Communities punish some behaviors, while rewarding others. Were they not to do so, morality would cease to exist. It would be an empty exercise in which every individual could justify any act. The result would be social anarchy.

Moral Nihilism

But perhaps this is wrong. Perhaps the question of whether absolutism or relativism is correct is irrelevant because morality itself is either unnecessary or impossible. In this case, it might not matter whether any moral theory is right. If morality is beside the point, its validity is immaterial. If people can live without moral rules, why not just abandon the entire rickety structure? Why introduce oppressive strictures—whatever these may be—if they produce no measurable benefits?

As it happens, there are any number of theorists who support this position. They may be thought of as nihilists, that is, as persons who believe there are no objective grounds for any moral principles—and hence these are dispensable. Roughly speaking,

nihilists come in three categories: the nice, the nasty, and the skeptical ones. Although at first glance, theirs might seem to be an untenable position, they are remarkably popular.

Far and away, the most influential of the nice nihilists was Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Durant & Durant, 1967). He famously believed that human beings were born nice, but were corrupted by society. Thanks to the invention of property and its defense by government elites, people competed for social preference. As a consequence, some finished up wealthy and powerful, whereas others ended up poor and oppressed. In a state of nature, however, people were all noble savages. They did not require external controls because their impulses were naturally benevolent. Left to their own devices, they were spontaneously caring and generous.

In Rousseau's ideal world children would be allowed to choose their own lessons (Rousseau, 1993). Instead of being tainted by adult indoctrination into the iniquitous practices in which they indulge, children would choose to do right because this is what they instinctively desire. If they required a government to coordinate complex activities, it would be one dramatically different from the standard varieties. It would be grounded in "The General Will" (Rousseau, 1984). What everyone together wanted would therefore become the guiding light for social leaders.

But everyone knows—or should know—how this turned out. One of the strongest advocates of The General Will was none other than Adolf Hitler. He imagined himself to be the embodiment of the deepest desires of the noble German people. As their supreme leader, he would actualize their joint interests. He knew what was needed and would not allow the objections of those less enlightened prevent his progress. If need be, they would be consigned to the ash heap of history.

In truth, Hitler demonstrated two incontrovertible facts. First, there is no such thing as a consistent General Will. Individuals have many conflicting interests. A belief that any particular person can understand what everyone jointly wants is confounded by the fact that no consensus exists. Second, what some people want can be horrendous. If many people are born nice, it is nevertheless true that others are not. And even if all were born nice, it is undeniable that many grow up to be anything but. They, like Hitler, can be selfish or vicious, or both.

Thomas Hobbes (1956) warned of this possibility centuries ago. He argued that in a state of nature people are selfish killers who precipitate a war of all against all. In this, he may have overdrawn the dangers. It is doubtful that everyone is that mean-spirited. It is likewise doubtful that a monarch is necessary to control their depredations. Nonetheless some people are clearly dangerous and have to be controlled for the welfare of the whole. Nice nihilism therefore founders on the shoals of human nature. People are simply not uniformly nice and some do have to be restrained. Morality, it turns out, is one of the most important mechanisms for doing so.

Not as prominent as nice nihilism is the nasty variety. It too, however, has attracted numerous devotees, most of whom think of themselves as hard-headed realists. Not for them the squishy romanticism of Rousseau. They prefer the red meat of Friedrich Nietzsche (1989). Nietzsche, who believed that God was dead, also believed that human beings had to rely on themselves to survive the tribulations of social existence. Heaping scorn on the weaklings who exhibited a slave mentality, his heroes were the supermen. Better endowed than the ordinary ruck of mankind, these superior people fought to come out on top. Moreover, they deserved their success. They earned it. In essence, they wound up defining moral standards for those they dominated. This was simply the way of the world.

The problems with Nietzsche are several fold. First, he gives no idea from whence his moral standards derive. Why should the supermen win? What makes them better than others? Nietzsche merely assumes these things. Here his own fantasies of superiority seem to have dictated his moral principles. Second, in Nietzsche's imagination his supermen turn out to be winners. But in the real world don't powerful people compete with one another? And if this competition is unrestrained might it not end in serious damage—even to the supermen? In other words, wouldn't they generate a Hobbesian war of all against all? And third, how does any of this obviate the need for morality? That some can, and want to, dominate others is at best irrelevant to the question of what morality is, or should be.

The last group of nihilists is the skeptics. They join neither the nice ones in claiming that people are too kindly to require morality, nor the nasty ones in supporting

the ravages of the strong. Rather, they choose a third course. They, in essence, maintain that morality makes no sense. They doubt that it exists in any substantive sense. As exemplified by postmodernists (Bauman, 1993) such as Michelle Foucault (Norris, 1997), they assert that there is literally no such thing as truth. All we human beings have are opinions. We may believe certain things, but cannot be certain any of them are true. Furthermore, no opinion is inherently better than any other. The best people can do is to persuade others to agree with their point of view.

When applied to morality, this means that no moral opinion is superior to any other. Morality is therefore reduced to a matter of attitudes. You have yours and I have mine and that is the end of the matter. Nevertheless, this isn't really the end of the argument, for it turns out that most postmodernists are falsely modest. In reality, they are closet moralists. Not only do they have moral opinions, but they consider theirs superior to those of others. As it happens, most postmodernists are liberal or left of liberal in their sentiments. One of their favorite parlor games is thus attacking the assertions of conservatives. These are routinely "deconstructed" to demonstrate that they are arbitrary and/or nonsensical. This then is supposed to convince doubters that these others are wrong, while they—the postmodernists—are right. They are nicer and smarter; hence they deserve to be more influential.

Foucault (1972, 1995, 2009) himself was a political activist. Far from being neutral, he was certain he knew very many things. To begin with, he was an advocate of homosexual rights. He believed this group had been oppressed and deserved to be liberated. He felt similarly with regard to the mentally ill. They to had been unfairly repressed and ought to receive better treatment. In general, Foucault was outraged by social oppression. Thus, one of his bugaboos was Jeremy Bentham's panopticon (Bentham, 1948). This was a prison designed to keep inmates under constant observation from a centrally located position. For Foucault, it became a metaphor for the oppression imposed on ordinary persons in modern society. He believed in freedom and was going to fight for it with every ounce of his energy. Except, of course, that this contradicts the explicit skepticism of postmodern nihilism.

The so-called emotivists propounded an earlier version of skeptical nihilism. As represented by A.J. Ayers (1936), they too asserted that morality had no truth-value. They believed that morality existed, yet that it was a matter, not of opinions, but of feelings. If you liked something then it was good; it you did not, then it was bad. Calling a moral rule true was therefore merely a figure of speech. It was just another way of endorsing what the speaker emotionally desired. In this case too morality was deprived of the authority it had for both the absolutists and the relativists.

Toward a Workable Morality

So where does this leave us? If neither absolutism nor relativism captures the reality of morality, while moral nihilism does not provide an escape from the necessity of some form of morality, how are we to understand the enterprise? One of the fundamental stumbling blocks to solving this conundrum has been the very impetus to investigate the subject. Most people who have studied morality have had an ulterior motive. They were not merely seeking an understanding of how it operates; they were more concerned with discovering what was right or wrong. The goal was to justify some judgments while simultaneously disqualifying others. This has certainly been the case with liberals and conservatives. Thus, for conservatives, moral rules are not only absolute; they turn out to be conservative. Meanwhile, most liberals not only believe morality is socially constructed; they intend to redesign it along liberal lines.

These unacknowledged moral commitments, however, interfere with disinterested observations (Fein, 1997, 1999). Surreptitious moral agendas act as blinders that keep people from seeing what is there to be seen. Rather than being scientific, they resort to whatever means seem best suited to forward their underlying goals. This has had the effect of derailing a truly sociological analysis of morality. Instead of striving to be neutral, too many sociologists have become unvarnished advocates for particular moral perspectives. They have entered the moral battlefield in order to make the world a better place—at least according to their lights. Rather than examining their personal commitments, they usually take these for granted. In place of examining how these operate, they simply indulge in making and promoting specific objectives.

In order to get beyond this morass, it will be necessary to do two things. First, it is essential to explain why morality is what it is. To do so, however, we must answer several questions. Are there, in fact, recognizable regularities despite differences in moral conclusions? And if so, are there reasons why these features are present? This takes us to a second issue. Are there consequences for social survival in the ways morality operates? This is a functional and evolutionary query, but must not be a teleological one. It is absolutely necessary to refrain from being prescriptive. The objective is to determine the effects of morality, not advocate what it "should" be. To do the latter is to jump into the moral enterprise itself.

A Suite of Curious Characteristics

When we treat morality as an empirical matter a number of unusual characteristics come into focus (Fein, 1997, 1999). Always and everywhere it has exhibited a curious suite of attributes. Any viable theory of morality must therefore explain all of these. As it happens, absolutism, relativism, and nihilism each address some of these, but none explains them all.

Here are some of the most important features:

1)   Morality is contentious. Always and everywhere people fight about it. Despite the nearly universal desire for a settled code of conduct, there never has been one. Nor have people been indifferent to what the rules should be. They care and care deeply enough to battle for their own points of view.

2)   Morality is not a calculus. There is no definitive list of circumscribed moral principles. Nor is there an agreed upon method for deducing moral truths. Morality is decidedly not like geometry with its explicit axioms, postulates, and step-by-step proofs.

3)   Morality is rarely exact. It is almost impossible to be completely precise about what it allows or does not allow. There always seem to be exceptions to its rules, while these exceptions are themselves imprecise.

4) Morality is frequently extreme. What it demands can be impossibly idealistic. Moreover, what it requires is often impossible for flesh and blood human beings to deliver.

5) Morality can be mean and vengeful. The mechanisms through which it is enforced are often brutal. Many millions of people have literally been tortured and killed in its name.

6) Morality is constantly evolving. Despite the certainties of the absolutists, an objective examination of history reveals numerous instances of moral judgments changing over time. Thus, what at one point in time may be considered right will at another be rejected.

7) Morality is emotionally compelling. People do, in fact, commit to specific principles as if they were absolute. They do not question them, but uphold them with a frightening intensity.

8) Morality is pluralistic. As per the relativists, different communities do arrive at different moral conclusions and can be equally adamant in defending them. Furthermore, there does not seem to be a settled method for deciding between them.

9) Moral rules are both externally and internally enforced. Individuals apply sanctions to ensure that these standards are not violated. What is more, they direct these measures toward other people, but also toward themselves.

A Neo-Functional Perspective

Why then is morality the way it is? Why, for instance, are its operations so different from scientific endeavors? Science tends to be precise and rigorous, whereas morality is anything but. Likewise, science seeks to be accurately descriptive, whereas morality is blatantly prescriptive. One aims to tell us what is, whereas the other tells us what should be. While, as David Hume (1739) and August Comte (Simpson, 1969) observed, the two are often confused, they are not the same. It is therefore essential to understand what makes morality unique.

Morality serves critical functions. Wherever it is present, and it is present in every known society, it exhibits a collection of related consequences. Morality apparently enables human societies to survive. It reduces, albeit does not eliminate, inevitable intra-social conflicts. Without it—much as Thomas Hobbes speculated—societies would break down. While we do not have any pure cases of morality-free societies, Colin Turnbull's (1972) description of the Ik provides a useful comparison. This hunter-gatherer tribe, when forced into an agricultural lifestyle in inhospitable territory, foundered. With its old moral rules no longer relevant, few standards continued to be enforced by its members. A state of chaos ensued in which even very young children were forced to fend for themselves. They literally had to find their own food because their parents no longer felt impelled to do this for them

Morality, as hypothesized by primatologists such as Franz de Waal (2006), evolved from animal mechanisms of social control. But if chimpanzees need to maintain relative order within their troops, humans require even more regulation. With so many human activities involving long-term cooperation between multiple individuals, it is essential that conflict be held to manageable levels. Anything less would result in starvation. In fact, morality has succeeded in this. Human communities have not only survived; they have prospered. But in order for this to occur, the enterprise had to take a peculiar form, one different from what is generally presumed. Indeed, these misperceptions are part of the mechanism that enables it to operate.

What then are the functions that morality serves? But more than this, what peculiarities allow it to perform these tasks?

1) Morality clearly has a circumscribed set of central concerns. Everywhere and always, it is concerned with protecting human life. Everywhere and always, it seeks to protect people from physical harm. Everywhere and always, it regulates sexual interactions. And in almost all places and throughout time, it defines and defends property rights. These are the central conflicts it functions to contain.

2) Some social conflicts are inevitable. Contrary to various philosophical speculations, we human beings have never been entirely harmonious in our relationships. We have always had competing interests and, as per Hobbes, often pursue these with

damaging intensity. Thus, absent mechanisms for keeping these disputes within sustainable bounds, strife would rise to unsustainable levels. People would literally—and have literally—killed each other with a passion so great that entire populations have been wiped out.

3) There are predictable issues over which people compete, and from which they need to be protected. We are not just social animals; we are social animals of a particular kind. Thus, we are:

a) Hierarchical. We strive to rank higher than one another, sometimes with homicidal potency. No one wants to be a loser, and virtually everyone wants to be "special." Nevertheless, because only some individuals can come out on top, there are inevitably both winners and losers. This inescapably motivates damaging battles to determine who is best. The shape of these vary from society, and so, therefore, do the rules necessary to contain them.

b) Role-players. Our communities regularly display a division of labor (Durkheim, 1993). Nonetheless, not all roles are equally satisfying. As with hierarchy, jobs such as physician provide greater benefits than that of ditch-digger. The result is that people are motivated to seek the superior ones. But here too the battles can get out of hand, and, given that the roles being sought differ, so must the moral rules that regulate the competition.

c) Relationship-oriented. We form long-term attachments to specific other human beings. Most importantly, we fall in love. Individuals become bonded to one another and collaborate for their mutual benefit. Yet love is notoriously fickle. The jealousies and disappointments that it generates often produce dangerous conflicts. Not everyone finds love, and those who do find that it does not always last. Moreover, societies differ in how these relationships are organized and hence in the rules that keep them from becoming too contentious.

d)   Property exchangers. Although some social scientists believe property ownership is arbitrary, it is universal among human beings. So is exchanging various objects and services. But this too can produce imbalances that generate conflicts. Some people become rich, whereas others are consigned to grinding poverty. No wonder that people fight for a greater share of limited resources. Indeed, they have even gone to war to obtain what other people possess. Nevertheless, because property and exchange take different forms in different societies, so must rules that control theft and fraud.

4) Morality is, and must be, simultaneously predictable and changeable. Paradoxically, it has to be constant and inconstant at the same time. Thus, were moral rules completely malleable, it would be impossible for humans to know that was required of them. As a result, they could not comply with its prescriptions nor anticipate what others would do. Chaos would ensue, with the consequence that conflict increased.   On the other hand, were moral rules too inflexible, they could not keep pace with changing external conditions. Because the nature of social hierarchies, social roles, interpersonal relationships and property rights mutate over time, morality cannot be set in stone Inappropriate rules would then specify behaviors that increased rather than decreased conflict. Once more the consequence would put social cohesion in jeopardy.

5) Morality is in habitual tension. Predictability and changeability are not always compatible. Indeed, they are in regular opposition. Moral systems swing from being more or less stable as the conditions they address are in greater or lesser flux. In fact, this is one of the most important sources of moral disagreements. Absolutists and relativists differ largely in stressing one or the other of these poles. Thus, the absolutists demand complete stability, whereas the relativists imply significant volatility by championing the social construction of morality. The nihilists, in contrast, seek to avoid this clash by denying the underlying problem. None succeed because to be functional morality must be both consistent and inconsistent.

With all of these functional requirements, what is the nature of a viable morality? The question is not which particular rules best serve social purposes, but how must

morality be constructed in order to reduce social conflicts? This is not a moral question. To the contrary, it is an empirical question and a meta-question; not one within the enterprise itself. It is also a scientific question that can elicit a relatively objective answer.

A Socially Adjustable Morality

If neither relativism, nor absolutism, nor nihilism reflect how moral systems actually operate, what scheme comes closer to the truth? Some nihilists argue that it is impossible to capture the essence of morality, but every existing society employs some version of morality. Why then shouldn't be possible to describe the enterprise with a modicum of accuracy? The goal, after all, is not to validate personal moral commitments, but to come closer to an accurate empirical depiction of the activity.

What follows I attempt to do precisely this. I describe morality as a tripartite phenomenon, consisting of 1) informal rules that are paradigmatically transmitted, 2) which are created via polarized social negotiations, and 3) that are negotiated and maintained through the agency of intense emotions such as anger, guilt, shame, and disgust. Imperfect though this set of processes is, it facilitates a *socially adjustable* morality. These factors enable morality to operate under highly volatile social circumstances. But they do so at a price. They make morality a moving target.   Instead of being a set of definitive rules—that are either absolute or unequivocally constructed— morality is a process. It is something people do—not something they discover or create such that it cannot be contradicted.

A socially adjustable morality is mutable and imperfectly understood. People always disagree about it, even though there must be sufficient harmony for its rules to be imperfectly enforced. The goal, however, is not perfection. A functional morality does not have to prevent every transgression, nor supply humanity with what Thomas Sowell (1999) calls "cosmic justice." It merely has to keep important conflicts from becoming too violent.

How then does morality operate? To begin with, we must understand that the enterprise is about rules. It is also about how these are created and enforced. Prescriptions to the effect that "one shall" or "one shall not" are at its core. "Do not lie!"

"Do not steal!" and "Do not murder" are common formulations. But what do these mean, how are they formulated, and how are they implemented? Let us see.

1) Informal Paradigmatic Rules.   Moral rules are peculiar. For one thing, they are notoriously elastic. They are not the precise mandates most people imagine them to be. This is because moral rules are *informal*. There is no comprehensive list of them, nor are they formulated in unequivocal proclamations. The situation is comparable to highway speed limits. These may seem precise. Indeed, they are incorporated in detailed legislation and posted on metal signs along the roadway. Nevertheless, these are not the real rules. They are not the ones enforced. The actual rules are never definitively stated. We must ourselves figure out if it is acceptable to drive five or ten miles above the stated figure.

One way to understand informal rules is as incorporating multiple unstated qualifications. The official rule may assert: Do not tell lies. But this is not unconditional. We really mean something like: Do not lie <u>except</u>…. when the truth might hurt someone's feeling, or result in losing a job, or inform the IRS of what we do not want it to know. In other words, moral rules are always open to interpretation. Thus, we may be told that lying is wrong, but is it always wrong? The answer is: Of course not. Some instances of telling intentional untruths are not only acceptable; they are imperative. To truthfully answer a Gestapo question about whether we are hiding Jews in the basement, when we are doing so, would be grossly immoral.

But how do we know the difference between an acceptable lie and an unacceptable one? We learn this *paradigmatically*. Morality is not so much transmitted in definitive statements as through examples. It is via numerous instances that we decide what is required. With lies, we look to see who gets away with what. Little white lies turn out to be acceptable, nonetheless we are never provided with an exhaustive list of these. Indeed, ask the ordinary person to enumerate every qualification to the lying rule and most are flummoxed. They know there are exceptions, but cannot catalog them.

.Precision is impossible in these matters because it is impossible to conceive beforehand everything moral rules must proscribe. Too many contingencies arise, which may eventually change, for all the possibilities to be enumerated. This requires that the

rules be malleable. Discretion is imperative. In legal systems, this flexibility is achieved via precedents (Cantor, 1997). These provide evolving clarifications. In morality, it is supplied by the informality of its prescriptions.

This amorphous quality also allows us to employ the same words without realizing we have modified what is allowed. We can thus feel consistent without recognizing our inconsistencies. Because our understanding of moral rules is imprecise, we can also reconcile contradictory admonitions. Informal rules thus provide a fudge factor which reduces potential conflicts. People use identical language without realizing they disagree. This, for instance, enables them to proclaim a devotion to freedom while embracing diametrically opposed views of what freedom means.

2) *Polarized Quasi-Dialectical Negotiations*. The next question is how do informal moral rules develop? If they are not handed down from God or discovered in nature, from whence do they arrive? In this, the relativists are correct in asserting that they are socially constructed. But we must go further. Moral rules are socially negotiated. They emerge from a push and pull process, which involves many individuals over long periods of time. What results is an informal social consensus. Most members of a given society come to agree—more or less—that some things are right or wrong. Then they—more or less—enforce these propositions.

But we must take a closer look at these negotiations. They generally take place between two opposed factions, each of which considers itself on the side of the angels. A good guy/bad guy mentality emerges in which the partisans consider it imperative to defeat their enemies. The goal is to impose their own views, whether these concern the acceptability of something like abortion or gay marriage. Nevertheless, the ultimate outcome is usually different from what the partisans initially desire. A kind of synthesis emerges from the original antithetical positions, but the eventual consensus pleases neither.

Moreover, the contending moral blocs tend to be led by extremists. As true believers, these persons are apt to be exceptionally devoted to the cause. They are also less likely to listen to their opponents (the "bad guys"). Similarly, they are more likely to hold radical versions of their own side's position. Focused on not being seduced by the

opposition, they are equally motivated to provide a persuasive account of their own. This leads them to promote simplified and maximized editions of the party line.

In addition, quite unlike the philosophical ideal, factional leaders intend to win at all costs. Hence they demand unanimity. Because moral negotiations often pivot on the numbers engaged on either side, there is a premium on appearing consistent. Too vocal a dissent might suggest a weakness the other side could exploit. The upshot is an emphasis on orthodoxy. Only certain facts and percepts are to be set forth on pain of ostracism. These must go unquestioned, lest one's loyalty come into doubt. This, of course, implies that the other side's views need to be vigorously rejected. Moral negotiations are, therefore, fraught with conventionality and intolerance.

The simplified percepts promulgated are, however, usually idealizations. As stylized endpoints, they tend to represent the furthest extremes of the matter under contention. By being simple, they are easy to understand, and by being imprecise, they are cheerfully fudged. This enables each faction to accommodate diverse adherents. Furthermore, by claiming to be perfect, ideals inspire devotion. Because they promise a better world, they provide hope for those who require hope. Yet herein lies another rub. This ensures that in their pure form idealizations are impractical. Accessible only in the imagination, they are never completely actualized.

In the end, these sorts of negotiation factor a wide variety of interests into the eventual consensus. Because there are at least two competing sides, which are often succeeded by other coalitions, a multitude of different views get integrated into the final agreement. Since no single individual or group is in charge, no one controls these negotiations. Much as an economic marketplace determines prices by equilibrating supplies and demands (Hayek, 1988), so moral marketplaces balance competing needs. Moral spokespersons merely serve as agents for divergent coalitions. Though shamelessly indulging their personal biases, they nonetheless accommodate the sundry requirements of a host of constituents.

3) *Emotionally Intuited and Enforced Rules*. If moral negotiations integrate the interests of divergent constituencies, how do the players identify their interests? Their personal decisions are no more subject to calculation than the rules themselves. The

central mechanism turns out to be our emotions—and more particularly intense emotions. A variety of affects identify what individuals most want. It is also these, whether expressed inter or intra-personally, that provide the motivation to make these demands compelling. Moral regulations that do not command respect cease being rules.

The central emotion for intuiting personal needs and enforcing moral rules is anger. Anger arises when people are frustrated (Fein, 1993). It informs a person and his/her interlocutors that something desired is not being received. It also provides the energy to fight for this objective. An angry person diligently strives for what he or she wants and demands it is a way that motivates others to provide it. Anger, especially intense anger, is frightening. As a result, we either tend to propitiate or resist it. It is this potency that makes anger expedient in driving moral negotiations.

Anger also keeps the rules operative. If most members of a community are incensed by a violation, their irritation acts as a deterrent. Potential violators understand that a transgression will be met with rage; hence they control their urges. Should someone break a rule, the resultant phalanx of moral indignation can be terrifying. It can place a person in opposition to a large coalition of others. Far better, therefore, to comply rather than risk offending them.

Guilt is similarly effective. Freud (1953-1974), notwithstanding, guilt is anger turned inward. It is anger that intra-personally enforces mandates. When someone violates a rule, especially one to which he or she is committed, the result is self-directed rage. As such, it allows the person to monitor her own conduct. This enables morality to be enforced even when external monitors are not present. External agents, often one's parents, set the ball rolling; then the child internalizes their wrath and preemptively punishes him or herself. Thus, when she lies, the voice of conscience reins her in.

Two other extremely important emotional enforcers are shame and disgust. These too can be internalized, but operate on a different principle. Where anger and guilt frighten a person into submission, shame and disgust depend on the fact that moral rules are paradigmatically transmitted. Because we learn moral regulations largely through example, influencing the sorts of behaviors that provide these can control moral conduct. By manipulating what is socially modeled, the end product is regulated.

Consider shame. Ridiculing his or her behavior can shame a person. He or she subsequently becomes embarrassed by this negative attention. The individual then wishes to disappear from sight. At such moments, a person feels as if it would be best to drop straight through the floor. In essence, when shamed, a person is motivated to cease being a model for others. Whatever he or she was doing that violated a rule, he ceases doing, at least not visibly, so that it no longer encourages others to behave the same way. Was one lying? Well, when caught, one ceases to lie; at least publicly. Others are then no longer inspired to do what would not otherwise have occurred to them.

Disgust functions in a similar manner. In non-moral circumstances it arises when a person is exposed to a noxious substance, such as ripe excrement or rotting food. The evolutionary purpose is to motivate the avoidance of dangerous materials. Their smell or look impels people to move out of their orbit so they are less apt to contract a disease or succumb to a toxin. When a person is treated as a harmful material, the impulse is thus to avoid him or her. We say of a disgusting person, "you make me sick," and then treat him or her as such. Contempt therefore makes its target as invisible as does shame. Furthermore, when internalized, an object of contempt finds herself unworthy of social interaction and she self-enforces the requisite invisibility. In this case too, potential observers are no longer tempted to contravene important regulations.

Two other emotions that influence moral choices are love and sympathy. Unlike the preceding affects, these tend to be positive. They don't seek to injure or hide, so much as reward. Thus, we often follow rules that benefit others because we want to help them. Love and sympathy therefore reduce conflicts by suppressing their source. Nevertheless, love to can introduce a powerful sanction by causing pain. People, especially children, often do what is required because they fear its loss. They do not want to "disappoint" their parents; hence they do what is asked.

Putting the Pieces Together

Earlier I have argued that morality presents a suite of curious characteristics, all of which must be explained if a theory of morality is to be viable. Unfortunately, neither absolutist nor relativist depictions adequately account for these empirically observable features. Nor do the nihilist "escape hatches." To fill the void, I offer a more complex

neo-functionalist account: a tripartite socially adjustable version of morality. While it does not advocate particular rules, it explains why the rules are as they are. Thus:

Informal paradigmatically learned rules explain both why morality is inexact and cannot be a calculus. Given that such rules also entail a host of unspecified qualifications—exceptions that are always open to reinterpretation—the enterprise is inevitably evolving. That which must be adjustable and has to cover a myriad of unforeseen circumstances must of necessity be elastic.

Polarized quasi-dialectical social negotiations explain why morality is contentious, pluralistic, and extreme. If moral rules are continuously being hammered out by competing informal alliances, under the leadership of ultra-committed, idealistic partisans, fights are inevitable.   These sorts of negotiation also provide the means through which moral rules evolve and ensure that they will be inexact as they mutate. In the end, of course, different groups may come to different conclusions.

Next, *emotionally enforced and intuited rules* are not only imprecise; they can be mean and vengeful. Because strong emotions, such as anger and shame, are often stupid and cruel, they can go too far.   They can injure and not merely control. Yet they serve as generally effective controls, both internally and externally.

To further put these pieces in perspective, to be functional morality must be *simultaneously stable and unstable*. This is difficult to achieve, but informal rules paradigmatically learned, created in polarized negotiations and enforced by intense emotions accomplish the task. While these prescriptions are unstable in the sense that they change over time, they seem constant to the participants. The emotional and negotiation commitments of the players make them appear so. This ensures that they are reasonably predictable, even as they are modified over time. In managing this, informal rules, polarized negotiations, and emotional enforcement also achieve the central concern of morality in that these *reduce important conflicts*. While they cannot eliminate them, they do, for the most part, keep hierarchical, social role, relationship and exchange struggles from precipitating irreversible harm. This is verifiable by observing the operations of societies both large and small, in the present and the past. History

demonstrates that social solidarity has never been maintained anywhere without the intervention of the processes enumerated above.

This said, neither absolutism nor relativism is completely wrong. Each emphasizes valid aspects of morality, albeit from misleading perspectives. In fact, ethical relativists are entirely correct in emphasizing that morality is socially constructed. Its rules are what they are because members of individual societies collaborate in making them so. Just as Emile Durkheim (1915) suggested with respect to religion, they obtain their shape and power from the concerted efforts of the communities that establish them. They are not, however, self-validating. They can be challenged and changed; and routinely are.

The greatest problem with relativism is that the reformers who put it forth generally over-estimate their control. Many fancy themselves social engineers. They are certain that by applying their knowledge of how societies function, they can impose constructive adjustments. Unfortunately, these relativists do not possess the level of control or insight they believe they have. They too are only players in the larger moral enterprise. While they can inject their desires and understandings into the process, they cannot command it.

As for the absolutists, they emphasize the importance of tradition in determining moral directions. They point to the wisdom and experience embedded in our customary rules. These, they argue, deserve to be respected because they have been tested and found rock steady. In this, they too are reasonably correct. As the distillation of past moral negotiations, contemporary moral rules incorporate the knowledge and experience of those who contributed to their evolution. Mistakes may have been made along the way, but many were also corrected.

Tradition, moreover, is embedded in our psyches. We, all of us, have been indoctrinated into the moral consensuses of yesteryear. These were drummed into our heads when we were small. As a result, we carry them forward to employ in our current moral negotiations. Many unexamined emotional commitments feel absolute and therefore operate as if they were. We frequently treat them as eternal and beyond our

ability to alter. Yet they are neither. Even when we invoke the formulae of past eras, the manner in which they are applied usually differs from back then.

Conclusion

As participants in the moral enterprise, it is frequently difficult to discern how it operates. But it is not impossible. Because most people are committed to particular positions, the intensity of their beliefs often blinds them to moral realities. Determined to win moral victories, they cannot see what is there to be seen. This, however, is not a matter of intelligence or moral turpitude (Goleman1995, 2006). It is merely evidence of being engaged in the morality game.

Nor can we expect this to change. Individually we may be able to separate ourselves from the parts we play, but this will never be a general phenomenon. Because we care about these matters, we will continue to resist a disinterested approach. This said, morality is not a supernatural mystery, but a remarkable socially adjustable mechanism. It may not be a compendium of immutable truths, but it is a repository of enduring social wisdom.

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