

The Moral Nature of Reality

Discussions about morality have shaped human understanding of the world since the beginning of time, giving rise to a vast and rich body of content. Yet, morality remains an abstract and challenging concept to define.

People tend to unconsciously adhere to moral codes or norms, yet few take the time to seriously examine their origins or validity. Even in times like the Middle Ages—often dismissed as an era of ignorance and superstition—thinkers like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and René Descartes, among others, engaged in profound scholarly inquiries into the nature of belief and morality. Perhaps the definition of superstition is too narrow: often seen as a blind belief in deity, is more accurately characterized as the unthinking acceptance of ideas without reflection.

When Aquinas attempted to use reason to prove the existence of God and the validity of the Mosaic laws, he distinguished himself as a non-superstitious individual compared to those who blindly followed Christian doctrines without ever scrutinizing them. Similarly, Socrates, as portrayed in Plato's *Apology*, challenged the unexamined beliefs of Athenians' superstitions, embodying a moral rationality that sought to dispel ignorance.

It was not until modern times that thinkers began to recognize the irrational elements within morality. Many attempts, reminiscent of Spinoza's efforts to build an entire ethical framework from fundamental metaphysical propositions, ultimately failed, highlighting the difficulty of reducing morality to rigid structures. Marx notably pointed out the relativity and fluidity of morality as a dynamic superstructure, asserting that its changes are fundamentally based on production relations.

It may be reasonable to assess that the bourgeoisie has its own morality while the proletariat has its own as well. The opposition between these two classes leads to a higher unity, forming what can be seen as the morality of the state. Marx's theory is perhaps a product of its historical context; he understood the brutal opposition and exploitation, as well as the structure of unity in opposition. Without the proletariat, the bourgeoisie would perish; without the bourgeoisie, the proletariat would lose its status as the object of exploitation and thus be redefined.

However, Marx's perspective oversimplifies the issue of social classes, which, in turn, simplifies the discussion of morality. I believe that morality, as a superstructure, is indeed in a state of flux. Nevertheless, I contend that fundamental reason for this fluidity lies in individual utilitarianism, which may

manifest as production relations (for example, if the so-called exploitative relationship increases the suffering of the proletariat).

Indeed, each individual attempts to maximize their happiness within the vast web of society, and society should allow people to pursue their happiness. Personal asceticism may be an exception, but imposing asceticism on others is a crime. Morality has always been built upon people's continuous adjustments to society to find ways to maximize their happiness, and it is inherently experiential.

Primitive people, in their struggle against nature, would skillfully attempt to combat it. Though their individual strength constrained them, they would still try various methods to maximize their happiness and minimize their losses, such as using different tools and traps. According to Rousseau, once people discovered that social cooperation and the establishment of a social contract could better alter nature, they resolutely entered a social state. This meant accepting the moral constraints of cooperation and being bound by something more abstract, as the saying goes, "man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains."

However, no one willingly subjects themselves to bondage; it is an immutable truth that the will cannot rationally choose actions that reduce net happiness. The reason people voluntarily accept various moral constraints is that their rationality has made comparisons, leading them to choose between two options: the first is to abandon all social elements and return to a purely natural state, or to adopt a related inclination toward a hedonistic philosophy promoting a sense of conflict-free enjoyment (though, even in this case, one does not enter a purely natural state, as the ability to enjoy arises from a peaceful environment, which cannot exist in a purely natural state). The second option is to accept the constraints between individuals within society, which significantly enhances their net happiness compared to the first option.

Therefore, I believe that the starting point for studying morality should be human actions. We assume that any individual's behavior is predicated on maximizing their net happiness. (Note that some altruists may criticize this, but my counterargument is that the essence of altruism still involves enhancing one's own happiness; the idea of "finding joy in helping others" supports this notion.) Thus, when we discuss happiness here, we are not referring to mere self-interest.

If we consider each person as a node in a vast network, then each node will adjust its behavior based on the feedback from the nodes it interacts with. More broadly, this means adjusting to all experiences encountered to achieve the maximum net happiness. The result of this adjustment process is that a person learns how to anticipate the net happiness return of a specific action in

a particular context. Based on rationality, one can choose different actions in a given state to maximize their net happiness.

For example, how does one learn to walk? Is "learning to walk" not essentially about figuring out how to adjust based on visual input, tactile feedback from the feet (a lower-level sense), and perception of a 3D environment (a higher-level sense)? These senses are innate, but infants do not integrate them initially, leading to falls and tumbles. However, as they gradually learn which movements maximize their net happiness in a given sensory context (i.e., avoiding falls), they begin to walk. Imagine if you were deprived of all your senses; would you still be able to walk?

Similarly, every human action is a result of experience and is aimed at maximizing net happiness. If the example of walking pertains to adjusting to the natural environment, then the emergence of morality relates to adjustments made in the social environment. Moreover, the actions taken by each individual after such adjustments subtly alter the moral framework of others through feedback signals from their actions.

Morality is "the result of human actions, not the result of human design." Each person is constantly adjusting in their social environment.

A large moral net is formed, and this big net is constantly changing due to the continuous action of individual wills. This is something out of control, coming out! It is the greatest work of life! Just like the weeds that are dried by fire, they will eventually grow back. It can be seen that no one can design what morality "should be," because when emphasizing design, we focus on the power of the center, a kind of control.

The renowned philosopher Immanuel Kant posits that each individual possesses their own moral code, which can be divided into categorical imperatives and hypothetical imperatives. The former is unconditional, while the latter is conditional, and the insights regarding actions and their relationship to achieving conditions are experiential and vary from person to person. Therefore, to achieve a universal form of legislation, one must identify the categorical imperatives within these codes. However, this perspective is exceedingly absurd.

All principles in the world are conditional, and only the subject themselves can fully understand these conditions. Moreover, each condition is the result of another premise, which in turn is the result of yet another premise, ultimately leading to a final outcome—maximizing one's net happiness. For example (from left to right, moving from effect to cause):

Maximizing Net Happiness ← Increasing Net Income ← Increasing Marginal Utility ← Increasing Sales ← Enhancing Social Reputation ← Building Social Trust ← Engaging in Philanthropy ← Caring for the Elderly

Each step in this causal chain is experiential, representing the patterns that individuals continuously observe and summarize in the empirical world. These patterns are inherently subjective and always open to critique at any stage. This stands in contrast to mathematics, where any inference is beyond reproach.

In conclusion, morality is not a fixed or designable concept; rather, it arises from each individual's continuous adaptation and adjustment within social interactions. It reflects the innate human pursuit of happiness and illustrates the complex, dynamic relationship between the individual and society. The formation of morality is a natural, evolutionary process that embodies the accumulation of collective wisdom and the transmission of experience, rather than serving an absolute norm. Therefore, we should approach the diversity and complexity of morality with an open mind, while continually reflecting on and adjusting our actions in practice to promote social harmony and progress.

Evaluation Letter

Hello Yuhan,

First of all, congratulations on finishing this essay! It is an ambitious and thought-provoking exploration of morality. It's also beautifully written.

The argument you present is rich and multifaceted, examining morality as a dynamic and experiential construct rather than a fixed or absolute concept. I particularly appreciate your effort to ground abstract ideas in practical examples, such as the analogy of learning to walk.

However, the essay would benefit from greater clarity and conciseness. Some sentences are overly complex, making the core arguments harder to follow. For example, your discussion of Kant's moral imperatives could be streamlined to better connect with your broader argument.

I would encourage you to organize your essay into clearer sections with explicit transitions to guide the reader through your argument. For instance, separating the historical perspectives, the critique of Marx, and your utilitarian framework into distinct sections would enhance readability. Finally, consider adding more citations or examples to strengthen your claims, particularly regarding the fluidity of morality in contemporary contexts.

Overall, this is an amazingly done project! Congratulations, you have received an A(95+) on this essay.

Kexin Tang