



Introduction to the CSF Morality Series

"Either ethical principles, such as justice and human rights, are independent of human experience, or they are human inventions... Every thoughtful person has an opinion on which premise is correct. But the split is not, as popularly supposed, between religious believers and secularists. It is between transcendentalists, who think that moral guidelines exist outside the human mind, and empiricists, who think them contrivances of the mind." - Edward O. Wilson [1].

"Morality appears to claim objective authority... On reflection, morality's special authority appears mysterious, and we may suspect it is illusory" - Russell Blackford [2].

These two quotes set the scene well for a series of Morality articles I'm embarking upon, as moral issues are getting more complex, a steady stream of exciting research is published, views on Morality seem to be diverging more, the morality debate is getting more heated, and terminological confusion reigns; all of which complicate the discourse on morality, and moral progress in general. My contention is that humanity's moral progress will have to play catch-up with technological progress to some extent, for the sake of our survival.

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It's hard to think of anything as prevalent and important in human life, as morality. All societies, all cultures and sub-cultures, all groups, all religions, all gangs, all companies, all parents and indeed all individuals have some ethical code which they use to judge others, try to live by to various degrees, and to some extent either pass on to others (like their kids or new members) or even force onto others. A colourful tapestry indeed, not only of widely divergent and conflicting values, but also widely divergent views on the source of morality and how that can be accessed.



Despite these enormous differences, what we all have in common is:

- Some general sense of morality, with signs of overlapping core values across cultures, genders and age groups
- That we typically hold strong views about “our” morality, which we often regard as superior (despite the fact)
- That most people do not bring any rational scrutiny to their ethical code, and the validity or the source of that code. Some people question specific values over time, but very few take the next step to question the actual source of their morality or the claims to objectivity of the morality they were raised with.

This series will explore these highly complex and emotive topics with an open mind, and without claiming to have all the answers. It will be an exploratory journey which could conceivably lead to a change in views, with more literary research, as more primary research is published by scientists, and as there will hopefully be constructive and open-minded debate. We can embark on this exploratory journey with a sense of humility, while still asking the hard questions and challenging unsubstantiated claims, deep-seated emotional needs and what people uncritically take for granted.

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These articles will endeavour to also address some of the more fundamental underlying (and quite related) issues:

- The proliferation of terminological confusion and misalignment, like the heated debate between proponents of Objective and Subjective Moralities (what E.O. Wilson called transcendentalists and empiricists). This could partially be a purely terminological issue. It could also be more fundamental, for example the limitations of using a subjective-objective dichotomy and whether it is the optimal way to frame a meta-ethical debate.
- Widespread visceral responses to the very idea of Subjective Morality. It seems to me these responses could have several causes (over and above any terminological confusion), which are all highly relevant for any discourse on morality:

- The mistaken assumption that Subjective Morality necessarily equates to an arbitrary morality
- A deep-seated need many people seem to have for an unambiguous, objective morality. It should stand to reason that experiencing a psychological need for objective and clear-cut morality (like the need for everlasting life or an omnipotent divine being taking care of us), does not equate to the existence of that which many people crave. We should bring critical scrutiny to the potential impact of needs like this on our reasoning
- The Cartesian Anxiety, as coined by Bernstein [3]
- The role which supposed objective moral systems (like that of Christianity) played in creating expectations and providing a well-established frame of reference for non-philosophers and even philosophers, over many centuries. We should bring rational scrutiny to these moral frameworks and the expectations we were socialized (or even indoctrinated) into
- The fact that most people experienced authority figures categorically instilling a sense of objective morality (without substantiating it): initially their parents and educators and then the state with their codified legal systems.

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Recent Research

This series will draw extensively on the volumes of groundbreaking empirical research which were published over the last few decades. Key contributing disciplines include:

- Evolutionary Biology and Socio Biology (E.O. Wilson, Frans de Waal, David Sloan Wilson)
- Evolutionary Psychology (Jonathan Haidt, Steven Pinker)
- Cognitive Neuroscience and Neuro Ethics (Antonio Damasio, Joshua Green and Walter Glannon)
- Anthropology and Neurological Anthropology (Oliver Scott Curry)
- Philosophy of Mind (Shaun Gallagher)
- It will, of course, also draw on Moral Philosophy, especially those Moral Philosophers taking the empirical research seriously (Michael Ruse, Russell Blackford, and Peter Singer).

Terminology and References

Regarding terminology and references, my approach with the entire series is **meta-ethical** (investigating the source of morality and how we can assess moral truths, if at all) and not **normative** (evaluating specific actions and/or moral principles). I will nevertheless attempt to steer clear of getting too abstract and avoid the complexities of the meta-ethical landscape, partially to avoid pointless terminological bickering and because these won't be academic articles. Likewise, sources will be provided to refer to useful literature, to quote from specific sources and to give recognition as appropriate, as these articles will be in-depth and well-researched. However, academic conventions will not be strictly followed, as the writing will be more popular in nature.



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The only other term defined here at the outset, is **morality** itself: "The differentiation that actions and intentions can be classified as good or bad, with a set of related principles to govern appropriate human behaviour". This definition is deliberately general enough not to imply whether these principles are objective or subjective; whether they are the result of divine instructions, culture, or evolution; and whether we access them through revelation, rational thought, empirical science, a special moral sense, or moral intuitions. It will definitely be further refined as the series continues.

The following sources could be useful for further reading about morality definitions in general: [4][5][6][7][8]. Specific relevant terms will be defined in each future article, as required.

A Tentative Roadmap

Below is a broad and tentative roadmap for this Morality Series. It is by no means cast in stone, and will in all likelihood evolve too. For now, a series of 9 articles are envisaged as a starting point. A planned quarterly publishing schedule of these articles means it should run at least for the next 2 years. This Introduction will remain a Featured Article on the CSF Website, its roadmap will be updated as it changes, and hyperlinks will be added as new articles are published, so it can serve as an index to the series:

1. Introduction to the CSF Morality Series (this article)
2. Is Christian Morality Objective?
3. The Holocaust and Christian Claims about an Objective Morality
4. Are religious societies morally superior or more successful?
5. Sam Harris' claims to objective morality
6. Mark Wilson's claims to objective morality
7. The line between good and evil

8. A critical attempt to explore the source of morality - Part 1
9. A critical attempt to explore the source of morality - Part 2.



The next three articles will deal with Christian Morality and its claims (which tend to muddy the waters of Morality discourse more than anything), followed by an evaluation of two secular examples also claiming objective status, then a more general article about the line between good and evil (and how that is commonly drawn). The series is planned to culminate in 2 articles critically exploring a possible secular and subjective foundation of morality with an open mind. It will also attempt to show that the differences between some secular attempts to claim objective status and others embracing a subjective status are not as far apart as the heated nature of the debate seems to indicate.

To conclude this introduction, exploring Morality is at the same time:

- Highly complex
- Highly challenging due to the enormous and entrenched differences (on top of the complexity)
- Highly relevant to survive on our planet, without destroying it and ourselves
- Highly exciting due to the volumes of new research from so many different disciplines, shedding more light on this topic than we've ever had before, as well as the hope that brings for a more mature and rational morality.

Next article in the Morality Series:

"Is Christian Morality Objective?" (scheduled for 25 March 2022). Don't miss this article, it will provide in-depth coverage of an important topic.

Sources

[1] "The Biological Basis of Morality" by Edward O. Wilson (The Atlantic, April 1998)

[2] "The Mystery of Moral Authority", by Russell Blackford (Introduction and Overview)

[3] "Beyond Objectivism and Relativism" by Richard J. Bernstein (p16)

[4] The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

[5] The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

[6] "The Quest for a Moral Compass - A global History of Ethics" by Kenan Malik

[7] "Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics" by George Matthews (ed) (in the Open Textbook Series)

[8] BBC Ethics Guide

https://web.archive.org/web/20131028131348/http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/introduction/intro_1.shtml

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Published on theconf.xyz on 4 March 2022