

Handout #1a: In Search of Moral Universals

1. The Science of Morality

In many contexts in daily life, we use “moral” to **compliment** people and we use “immoral” to **criticize** them. We also use these terms to **evaluate** people’s behavior, and the laws and institutions under which we live. If we discuss whether someone is a moral person or whether a politician did something immoral we first **describe** their behavior and then evaluate that behavior and make some judgment as to whether or not the people we’re discussing did things they **shouldn’t** have done. When we use “moral” and “immoral” in these ways our discussions and the judgments, beliefs and assertions that emerge from them are not parts of any contemporary science. The sciences (e.g. biology and psychology) are relevant to determining what someone has done and why she has done it, but to **evaluate** these behaviors and **assess them in normative terms** (as actions that were right or wrong) we must go beyond the sciences we currently recognize as such. Our conversations in courts of laws and public opinion involve the use of “moral” and “immoral,” where these terms function as non-scientific or extra-scientific terms of evaluation and judgment. There is more to life than science.

But there are other uses of “moral” and “immoral” that are scientific in the intended sense. We can seek to describe “the morality” of a particular feudal lord in 17th century France or a slave owner in the Confederate South without making a judgment as to the accuracy or value or validity of this morality. Here we do not speak *from* a morality; instead, we speak *about* that morality. Different countries have different laws written into their constitutions, judicial decisions and other official documents. Similarly, different communities enact different moralities, where these are social norms that are more or less shared by the individual people who live in those communities. Describing these moralities and the manner in which they change over time is a scientific concern. The science in question is **sociology**.

Similarly, different individuals (within a linguistic or cultural community) will have different moral codes to which they ascribe. The science we use to describe these codes and explain their effects on people’s thought, talk and actions as they unfold over time is **psychology**.

Moral psychologists study two somewhat distinct interacting components of our minds.

(1) **Moral Sensibility**: Each one of us has a different conscience or what Darwin, following Hutcheson and Hume, called a “moral sense.” This is a complex part of your psychology that plays a central role in generating and modifying your emotions of blame and praise, regret, remorse or pride. Of course, your experience of these emotions is affected by your “moral ideology.” (For an analysis of this concept see below.) And moral sensibility is both more complex and more heavily influenced by ideology than the traditional senses: taste, smell, touch, hearing and sight. For this reason I am labeling this component of your moral psychology “moral sensibility” rather than moral sense. But this is a largely terminological advance over Hutcheson and Hume. For I agree with Hutcheson and Hume that our moral sensibilities place constraints on the kinds of moral ideologies we will accept. Components of your moral sensibility are in this sense “pre-political.” Hume placed sympathy in this class of “natural” or pre-political components of moral psychology. And Kant also described a number of emotional capacities as pre-conditions for susceptibility to a core component of moral ideology: i.e. ideas of duty or obligation.

There are such moral qualities that if one does not possess them, there can be no duty to acquire them. These are moral feeling, conscience, love of one's neighbor, and respect for oneself (self esteem). There is no obligation to have these, because they are subjective conditions of susceptibility to the concept of duty and are not objective conditions of morality. They are all sensitive [ästhetisch] and antecedent but natural predispositions [praedisposito] of being affected by concepts of duty. Though it cannot be regarded as a duty to have these predispositions, yet every man has them, and it is by means of them that he can be obligated. (Kant, MM: 399).

It is important to recognize that your moral sensibility is probably not something you fully control. Unless you are uncommonly reflective and deliberate in your social life you will regularly evaluate the actions of your family members, friends, roommates, coworkers and celebrities in a more or less "automatic" fashion. This is your moral sensibility at work, though again it is constantly influenced by your more articulate opinions about right and wrong and the rest of your moral ideology.

Darwin emphasized the functioning of your moral sensibility when you evaluate your own past actions. Perhaps in response to the praise or criticism of others, you think about what you have done, and experience pride or remorse depending on your evaluation of that past behavior. Hume says sympathy typically enters into moral sensibility at this point in your thinking as you'll feel pride if you're affected by the happiness you've caused or remorse if you're reflecting on the pain and suffering for which you're responsible. But if you're a psychopath you won't have appropriate emotional responses of these kinds. Sympathy is species typical but not universal.

(2) **Moral Ideology**: In addition to your moral sensibility as described above, you also have a moral ideology. The moral ideology of the USA is pretty much Locke's theory of natural rights to life, liberty and the acquisition of property in the pursuit of happiness. If you were raised in China or Russia you would have a different moral ideology, which placed greater emphasis on the good of the community or the value of maintaining its traditions over time. If you were raised a Christian and exposed to the morality articulated by Jesus and the apostles, that probably informs your moral ideology. If you were raised a Muslim and exposed to the morality articulated in the Koran, you probably have a somewhat different ideology. Of course, these examples are overly simple. Any particular person (like you) will have a mix of various ideologies reflecting the mix of people to whom they've been exposed. But religions and philosophies (including accounts of human nature and economic doctrines anchored in those accounts) are the clearest examples of ideologies.

Your moral ideology interacts with your moral sensibility to produce your moral psychology. The study of our moral psychologies is a scientific matter. We need to integrate moral psychology in this sense with the sociological study of the shared moralities we find in various communities to generate an overall account of how moralities are formed, how they change over time, and how they interact with other aspects of our psychologies and social lives.

Initial questions: Can you articulate or verbally express or describe your morality? What does your moral sense look like? When do you feel proud? When are you ashamed? Who do you criticize as immoral and why? Who do you admire as moral and why? How do these emotions interact with your moral ideology? Do you have rules by which you live? Which of these do you consider moral rules?

Task: Separate into groups and see if you can articulate some shared moral rules or norms that play a role in your lives. Write them down. Then see if you can find some moral rules or norms that some in the group endorse and others reject. Write them down. Finally, try to

explain the respective roles played by (i) moral sensibility and (ii) moral ideology in the genesis of these rules or norms.

In addition to describing and explaining various features of moral sensibility and moral ideology, many psychologists and sociologists turn their attentions to “moral cognition.”

(3) **Moral cognition** is the kind of moral thought, inference, reasoning and “processing” that issues in “moral” judgments, evaluations, emotions and actions. In calling these judgments “moral” the moral psychologists must take herself to be **describing** rather than **evaluating** the cognition in question or she will wind up defining her morality into her supposedly scientific account of people’s moral psychologies. Moral cognition which is “bad” or grossly mistaken and pernicious according to the lights of the researcher must be just as much “moral cognition” as moral cognition she thinks of as good. But characterizing, and then achieving, this form of neutrality, is very hard to do.

For example, it was common in the 18th century to distinguish **prudential reasoning**, which is reasoning about how to achieve what is best for you overall from **moral reasoning**, which (according to these utilitarian theorists) is reasoning about how to do what is best overall for everyone you can affect through your actions. Does this definition of “moral reasoning” rest on the theorist’s moral commitment to the viciousness or immorality of selfishness?

Notice that bias against those who advocate selfishness is not an immediate consequence of a theorist’s accepting a distinction between moral and prudential calculation. Suppose the psychologist says that if you’re reasoning about what is best for you and ignoring the effects your actions will have on other people then you are not thinking “in moral terms.” She is then defining egoism as a **non-moral philosophy** or way of thinking. The psychologist would then have to interpret those who only think about themselves—and who advocate the way of life in which this issues—as urging us to abandon attempts at living morally in favor of living prudently. Just as Nietzsche admired the person who lives beyond good and evil, Ayn Rand and her “Objectivist” acolytes (who believe we shouldn’t think of ourselves as obligated to others) might be thought to advocate life without morality. Crucially, even if we think of these philosophies as non-moral, we can still consider the reasons for and against acting as they recommend or command. So in defining the kind of reasoning they recommend as “non-moral” we needn’t “rule them out” a priori.

Question: If we’re constructing a science of morality and trying to make it as “value neutral” or objective as possible, can we still describe Rand’s Objectivist philosophy as non-moral in character? Is it better to describe Objectivism as an alternative morality? Is there a worthwhile distinction to draw between a moral ideology and sensibility on the one hand and an extra-moral ideology and sensibility on the other? (Attempts to distinguish moral norms from extra-moral conventions raise similar issues. See below.)

The philosopher Bishop Butler spoke of prudence and morality as distinct “superior principles” to which people give their allegiance (or fail to do so) at those various points when they struggle to be good or prudent. When what is best for me is really bad for the other people in my life, the struggle between these principles within me is aptly described as a “test of character.” The good person does not ignore the happiness of others. The bad one does. Even more sophisticated accounts of moral cognition were advanced by Kant when he theorized about the role judgments of fairness play in generating a sense of duty or obligation. And in the 20th century, Lawrence Kohlberg became famous by advocating a Kant-inspired developmental account of moral cognition, which posited different stages in our moral thinking from childhood to adulthood. Kohlberg’s philosophy was a science insofar as he inspired a

large number of students to assess the validity of his developmental theory with tests and measures of various sorts. We will discuss Kohlberg's theory later in the course.

2. The Distinction between Morality and Normativity

Traditionally, morality is thought to be just one component of a more general phenomenon: normativity. The idea here is that we have lots of rules and make lots of evaluations that have little if anything to do with the morality or immorality of people and their actions as we ordinarily think of these things.

One possible example is, again, norms of prudence: it is imprudent not to wear your seat belt or fail to save for your retirement. But if these actions don't harm anyone besides the agent, many people will balk at describing that agent's failures as immoral. Of course, this is not uncontroversial. Those who believe we have genuinely "moral" duties to ourselves will reject this way of conceptualizing the moral/prudential distinction.

More common examples are rules of etiquette and comportment. If someone stands too close to you while speaking, she is breaking a tacit norm or social rule. (Those of us who have internalized this rule will think—or even say—that the "close talker" we've imagined **ought** to back up a bit.) But close talking isn't commonly described as immoral. Another example might be driving regulations. The British drive on the left while we drive on the right. There is no pressure to think one of these rules is "better" than the other. We need to have uniformity in practice so we don't run into one another, and this uniformity is enforced with a rule. But either uniformity is as good as the other. This is supposed to mark the rule out as a "**non-moral convention**" rather than a "**moral rule**" even if our reasons for imposing one these traffic rules or the other are partly moral in content.

Questions: What about religious traditions and rituals? Is the norm of resting on Saturday or Sunday conceptualized a moral rule or a non-moral convention by the religious Jew or Christian? How about prohibitions on eating pork? Do Muslims and Jews think of their dietary commands as moral rules or conventions?

According to O'Neill and Machery, "Westerners find it natural or intuitive to classify an assertion such as "Thou shall not kill" as expressing a moral norm, and assertions such as "Look left before crossing the street" and "Men should wear a tie at work" as expressing nonmoral norms." Do your intuitions agree?

Andrews, Ring and Vincent provide a better developed set of examples in the article we're discussing next:

Consider the following cases: correcting the way a child holds her dining utensils, caring about our friends' allegiance to our city's football team, helping our partner fold clothes the right way, or pulling over to the side of the road to accommodate a funeral procession. These actions or attitudes matter to us, and we care how they are performed or adopted by others—but this kind of feeling is generally not taken to be sufficient for morality. (Andrews, et al, 2019, 60)

Turiel and several of Kohlberg's other students argued that children draw a distinction between moral norms and non-moral conventions at an early age. We will look at their evidence later in the quarter when we read Haidt. Skeptics of the distinction, like Steve Stich, argue that the moral/convention distinction is an artifact of Western, educated, liberal societies.

Skepticism about the Depth of the Moral/Conventional Distinction: Some skeptics argue that *there is no good distinction to be drawn between moral rules and non-moral rules*. Others argue that any such distinction will rely on substantive moral commitments (e.g. the liberal idea that social and legal punishment should be limited to preventing harm and enforcing justice) and is therefore *parochial rather than universal*.

O’Neill and Machery are skeptical of the moral/conventional distinction insofar as they think this distinction is parochial rather than universal. But they think that social norm making, norm following and norm enforcement through punishment of norm breaking are universal features of human life. This leads them to endorse what they describe as the “normative sense hypothesis.”

3. The Definition of “Normative Cognition” and the Normative Sense Hypothesis

“Normative cognition, as we define it, involves the capacity to make normative judgments, to remember the norms one is committed to, to learn new norms, and to be motivated in various ways (including to be motivated to comply with the norms one endorses and to punish norm violators); it also involves emotions (e.g., admiration or even awe at normative behaviors, outrage or disgust elicited by norm violations, guilt and shame elicited by one’s own norm violations)” (O&M, 2019).

Questions: Is it circular to define “normative cognition” in terms of “normative judgments”? Can we drop this component of their definition and define “normative cognition” in terms of emotions? Is normative cognition essentially emotional? Should this be built into the very definition of “normative cognition” or is the connection between normative cognition and emotion a matter for debate and investigation? Are norms rules? If so mightn’t we define normative cognition as cognition having to do with rules?

A warning: When you’re thinking as a moral psychologist you should be careful not to “externalize” rules in your thinking. The rules that have reality in a person’s mind are reducible to her sense of the expectations of other people and her own conscience. Whatever the justification may be for enforcing and maintaining particular rules over time, the social rules you recognize are the expectations of those with whom you interact and their responses to your failure to meet those expectations. To learn these rules is to learn these expectations and consequences. It’s the job of your parents and teachers to communicate these expectations and consequences to you, and this may be difficult (especially if you have a disorder that affects your social cognition).

An alternative definition of “normative cognition”: normative cognition is the psychological capacity and proclivity to learn social rules or expectations, conform to those rules, evaluate, modify and revise social rules, to settle on a set of “rules of one’s own,” to react aversely to the breaking of these rules (with blame or shame) and reinforce rule-following by rewarding those who meet or exceed expectations (with love or praise).

Question: Is this an adequate definition of “normative cognition”? Why or why not?

“The “normative sense hypothesis” proposes that normative cognition, so understood, is shared by typical adult humans across cultures, develops early and reliably, has evolved, and may well be specific to human beings” (O&M, 2019).

Criticism: The idea that only humans have a normative sense is not well described as a component of the hypothesis that we have a normative sense and that it is species typical.

Indeed, we will see considerable evidence that normativity is universal but that it is not unique to humans (unless norms are not defined as expectations, but are somehow defined in terms of the sentences or symbols humans use to articulate rules). Relevant here is Darwin's claim that morality is universal but not unique to humans, as pretty much every feature of our moral sensibility (with the exception of the linguistic ability necessary to articulate, grasp and conform to moral laws or rules) is present in some form in the other social animals.

O'Neill and Machery contrast their **normative sense** hypothesis with Hutcheson's and Hume's hypothesis of a universal or (allowing for psychopaths and other pathologies) a "species typical" **moral sense**. They don't discuss Darwin's account of a species typical "conscience" which goes beyond the theory of the moral sense.

They also contrast their hypothesis with the claim that social norms are learned by children who employ "domain general cognitive resources" to achieve this feat.

Their idea here seems to be that a proclivity to learn and conform to norms is in some sense "hard wired" into us (whatever that means) and is relatively immune to the influence of moral ideology which is learned via the use of "domain general cognitive resources." (The term they used in their earlier drafts to frame this hypothesis was "evolved." But that doesn't work unless you deny the existence of cultural evolution. Otherwise, every "non-accidental" component of your moral sensibility and ideology counts as "evolved.")

Question: Does O'Neill and Machery's normative sense theory conflict with the classical understanding of moral psychology described above on which moral sensibility and moral ideology influence each other in remarkable ways? Perhaps O'Neill and Machery can acknowledge these interactions while insisting that the more general capacity or proclivity for normative cognition is not "learned." We might also interpret the moral sensibility theory of Hutcheson, Hume and Darwin as predicting universals in moral sensibility. Everyone agrees that moral ideology varies wildly. (Think about the differences in morality that exist between the orthodox members of religions and compare these too with our relatively liberal ideology.) But the components of moral sensibility that both Hume and Kant conceded were "preconditions" for placing each other under particular, ideologically supported expectations might be universal. Alternatively, if there are no moral universals, this counts against the postulation of moral sensibility, though we should not expect total universality or complete agreement in any feature of morality given the "top down" effects of ideology on sensibility acknowledged by those who defend the idea with any subtlety. At any rate, O'Neill and Machery are officially neutral on moral sensibility. Instead, they're investigating the universality of normative cognition.

Task: Go back to O'Neill and Machery's definition of "normative cognition" and my alternative definition of this concept and assess the plausibility of the claim that normative cognition as it is understood in these ways is a "hard wired" or "innate" trait or that normative cognition is in some sense "not learned." This task is complicated by O'Neill and Machery's admission that "the normative sense" is shaped by culture and learning. For according to O'Neill and Machery, "the normative sense of a typical adult human is complex and highly structured. It involves many normative concepts, values, and more or less abstract norms, and it is connected with motivational structures and emotions." And it is clear that many of the concepts and values that structure your normative sense were soaked up and so in some sense "learned" from parents, friends, TV etc.

At any rate, to argue that there are important "unlearned" components of this complex psychological phenotype, O'Neill and Machery set out to discover normative universals.

Though some human universals are learned (e.g. fire use, clothing, counting), universality might be *some* evidence of innateness. If we discover elements of norm guidance (and so normative cognition) in other primates, that might also be thought to provide evidence of the trait's "innateness." After all, if those animals who evolved into humans already followed norms and had the cognitive capacities necessary for this, and these traits were passed down to us, that would help explain why humans live by rules today, though it would leave unsettled to some degree the respective roles played by genes and culture in the inheritance of norm guidance and the psychologies of those of us who live by rules.

4. Problems with Giving a Neutral Anthropological Analysis of Norms or Rules of Action

So our initial task is to see **the ways in which human moralities (or rule systems more generally) resemble one another** and **the ways in which they differ**. O'Neill and Machery describe problems with this enterprise:

- (1) "Culture" and "community" are abstract concepts imposed on groups of individuals (or families of individuals insofar as "family" is a less abstract or more organic concept to apply to mammals). There may be many different cultures or communities each with distinctive norms living together in a single valley, region or neighborhood.
- (2) Language differences give rise to problems of interpretation. You can mistake the role played by a ritual or practice in the life of a community and because of this mistakenly describe the structure or content of a norm they accept. Since people use words in different ways, this problem also exists when the researcher, her audience, and the subjects under study all "speak the same language" in the colloquial sense of that expression.
- (3) It is very difficult to strike a balance between assuming other cultures are just like one's own and therein failing to acknowledge real differences on the one hand, and assuming other cultures are radically different than one's own and therein failing to acknowledge real similarities. There is no commonly accepted "de fault" mode of "otherness" an anthropologist is supposed to expect at the outset of her study.
- (4) Political ramifications distort science: if the anthropologist discovers people lack her morals and the morals of those who follow her work, this will help her argue for the inferiority of the people she's studying (e.g. the "white man's burden" of converting heathens to a Christian morality of which they are ignorant.). If she discovers that they share her basic moral principles and the principles of her audience (e.g. they respect certain natural rights), this will allow her to blame them for failures to observe what she takes to be the implications of these shared morals (e.g. their failure to honor women's rights).

O'Neill and Machery uses these problems to explain why few anthropologists have looked directly at differences and commonalities in morality and/or normativity more generally. The topic is too political for most scientists.

5. Against the Universality of the Moral/Conventional Distinction

I think it is immoral to lie, cheat and steal without good reason but that it is merely disgusting and not at all immoral to spit in a cup and then drink it. I therefore draw a distinction between the "moral" prohibitions on lying, cheating and stealing and the "merely conventional" ban on spitting and then swallowing what one has spit. Do all people draw such a distinction?

As we will see when we discuss Haidt, Turiel et al argue that some rules are conceptualized by children as “**authority dependent**,” and others are conceptualized as “**authority independent**.”

Experimenter: If your teacher says it’s “ok” to chew gum in class, is it ok to chew gum in class?

Kid: Yes.

E: If your teacher says it’s “ok” to pull the other kids’ hair in class, is it ok to pull their hair in class?

K: No.

E: If God says it’s ok to work on the Sabbath, is it ok to work on the Sabbath?

K: Yes.

E: If God says it’s ok to lie, cheat and steal, is it ok to lie, cheat and steal?

K: No.

Turiel and colleagues observed this pattern of answers even among religious children (e.g. in Amish communities) and concluded that **moral norms are conceptualized as authority independent** in contrast with mere conventions.

O’Neill and Machery agree with Stich that this distinction is both learned and parochial.

“The first body of evidence to support this claim comes from linguistics. In line with the proposal that normative cognition is a cultural universal, deontic modals—that is, words translating as “ought”—and translations of the normative predicates *good* and *bad* are apparently found in every language (Wierzbicka, 2001, 167–169; Wierzbicka, 2007). By contrast, some expressions that are closely tied to the moral domain in the United States are not found in all languages. Whereas in the United States judgments about whether an action is “right” or “wrong” are tightly connected to whether it belongs to the moral domain (Skitka 2010), translations of “right” and “wrong” are not found in every language. Furthermore, many languages do not have a translation of “moral” and thus do not lexicalize the distinction between moral and nonmoral norms (Wierzbicka, 2007, 68). If the moral domain were a fundamental feature of human cognition, we would expect the distinction between moral and nonmoral norms to be lexicalized in every language, as are deontic modals and the distinction between good and bad.”

“The second body of evidence comes from an ongoing research program meant to determine how people divide the norms they endorse into different kinds (see Machery, 2012, for a description). Unpublished preliminary results suggest that Americans draw a distinction between moral and nonmoral norms. In contrast, Indian participants as well as Muslim participants (of various national origins) do not seem to draw the same distinction, suggesting that American ways of delimiting the moral domain may not be universal.”

Question: How good are these arguments against the universality of the moral/conventional distinction? We will revisit evidence for and against the moral/conventional distinction when we read Haidt.

6. The Universal “Externalization” of Norms

O’Neill and Machery endorse a Kantian analysis of moral cognition they quote from the UCI philosopher of science P.K. Stanford:

“Humans experience the demands of morality as somehow *imposed* on us externally: we do not simply enjoy or prefer to act in ways that satisfy the demands of morality, we see ourselves as *obligated* to do so *regardless* of our subjective preferences and desires, and we regard such demands as imposing unconditional obligations not only on ourselves but on any and all agents whatsoever, regardless of their preferences and desires” (Stanford, 2017, 3–4).

A norm N is **externalized** by a person S when: (a) Preference-Independence: S feels or thinks she ought to conform to N whether or not she wants to so conform or wants anything she can get by conforming to N, and/or (b) General Applicability: S feels or thinks that anyone confronted with a situation relevantly like the one she faces ought to conform to N just as she must.

A norm N is **strongly externalized** by a person S when: (a) Preference-Independence: S feels or thinks she ought to conform to N whether or not she wants to conform or wants anything she can get by conforming to N, (b) General Applicability: S feels or thinks that anyone confronted with a situation relevantly like the one she faces ought to conform to N just as she must, and (c) External Source: S thinks or feels that N is categorical (or preference-independent) and applicable in full generality because S thinks N is created and/or enforced by an external agency: e.g. a god or God.

A norm N is **maximally externalized** by a person S when: (a) Preference-Independence: S feels or thinks she ought to conform to N whether or not she wants to or wants anything she can get by conforming to N, (b) General Applicability: S feels or thinks that anyone confronted with a situation relevantly like the one she faces ought to conform to N just as she must, and (c) S thinks or feels that N is categorical (or preference-independent) and applicable in full generality because S thinks N is a necessary truth or an eternal law which cannot be altered or revoked by any person or agent whether human or divine.

Stanford’s Evolutionary Explanation of Externalization: The tendency to externalize norms evolved via natural selection. Individuals with an externalized understanding of their obligations rather than a view of obligations that hinges on personal preferences (or even on an authority’s or society’s potentially changeable preferences) were more attractive partners for both cooperators and would-be exploiters. Generalizing norms—taking them to apply also to others in similar circumstances—and an associated demand that potential cooperation partners comply with the same norms helped cooperative humans discriminate against those who would exploit them. Groups of cooperators dominated defectors, making cooperation and the externalization essential to it, species typical today.

O’Neill and Machery claim that there is some evidence for a relatively weak form of Stanford’s account: “We think there is good evidence for the universality of some relatively weak form of externalization as well as at least some evidence against the universality of its stronger forms.”

Question: What is this “good evidence”?

7. Normative Relativity v. Objectivity

Evidence Against Strong Externalization: “Folk objectivity has been studied empirically by investigating whether subjects think two individuals can disagree about the truth of the claim in question without one of them being wrong: If people cannot disagree about a normative claim without fault, then its truth does not depend on the disputants’ attitude about it. So the perceived impossibility of faultless disagreement implies externalization. People from North America, Europe, China, Ecuador, and Singapore tend to classify some normative claims (e.g.

“hitting someone just because you feel like it is wrong”) as something that two individuals cannot disagree on without one of them being mistaken—at least if these two individuals are from the same background or culture (Goodwin & Darley, 2008; Beebe & Sackris, 2016; Beebe et al., 2015; Sarkissian et al., 2011). This finding supports the hypothesis that humans universally externalize some norms to at least some degree. But people are more likely to say that disputants can disagree over a norm and both be right if these parties are members of distinct cultures or populations (Nichols, 2004; Sarkissian et al., 2011; Sarkissian, 2016; Khoo & Knobe, 2016). This is evidence that ordinary people view the truth of such claims as dependent in some way on cultural beliefs, traditions, or normative frameworks, suggesting that people do not externalize all norms to the strongest degree imaginable.”

Comment: This methodology tests people’s attitudes about externalization. It doesn’t directly test whether they externalize and the degree to which they do. For example, a respondent R might say that A and B can disagree about whether x is wrong without either A or B being “at fault” for the disagreement. And yet it is compatible with this that when R gets into a disagreement with someone about x she always **faults** the person with whom she disagrees for failing to acknowledge the immorality of x. For this reason externalization may be more common and pronounced than O’Neill and Machery suggest.

The Psychological Benefits of Externalization: “Young and Durwin (2013) found that people were much more willing to donate to a charity when they were primed with the question, “Do you agree that some things are just morally right or wrong, good, or bad, wherever you happen to be from in the world?” in contrast to a prime that asked about whether they agree that “there are no absolute right answers to any moral question” (303). Rai and Holyoak (2013) primed subjects to think about the truth of moral claims as independent of individual or group preferences and found that such subjects were less likely to cheat on a task and expressed less willingness to make a norm-violating purchase compared with subjects in a control condition or a condition that primed an idea of morality as mind-dependent. A limitation of this research for present purposes is that it has been only been conducted with Western populations.”

Youthful Externalization: “There is also some evidence relevant to the development of norm objectivization within an individual’s psychology, at least in the West (Nichols & Folds-Bennett, 2003). Wainryb et al. (2004) found evidence that children externalize all norms and later learn to view some norms (e.g., those traditionally categorized as conventional norms) as mind- or culture-dependent. In Heiphetz and Young (2017), preschoolers were more likely than adults to judge that only one person could be correct in cases of disagreement about norms about hurting or helping others. Schmidt et al. (2017) report similar results: Children aged 4 and 6 were less likely than 9-year-olds to think that two disagreeing parties—an alien and a non-alien—who disagreed about a normative question could both be correct. In addition, as Heiphetz and Young (2017) note, younger children tend in general, across domains, to be objectivist even when older children are not.”

Questions: How has your understanding of morality changed over the years? Do you “externalize” it less than you used to (in the sense of “externalization” defined above)? Does externalization really augment compliance with moral norms? Does belief in God and his or her enforcement of morality augment compliance with moral norms? Should we expect loss of traditional Judeo-Christian religious beliefs (according to which God issues and enforces moral commandments) to induce a loss of moral motivation? What about Hindu cultures in which people profess believe in many gods (who battle with one another) or Buddhist cultures whose members renounce belief in a personalized god? Do they have other morality-enforcing myths? Are myths an essential or important component of moral motivation?

A More General Tendency to Reify or Objectify Social Phenomena: “Some sociologists and anthropologists have theorized that there is a cross-cultural inclination toward reification (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Reification occurs when a social entity is taken to be a natural one: Its social nature, including its mind-dependent mode of existence, is not recognized. For example, currency is reified if people do not grasp the social and mind-dependent nature of its status as money. Social kinds and social roles are commonly reified (Machery, 2014). Social norms get reified, too: as when people ignore the social origins of etiquette norms, treating them instead as mind-independent or natural. For instance, people often forget that the correct physical distance between two interlocutors is a matter of convention that varies widely across cultures. Much sociological research supports this claim. Gabennesch (1990, 2047) refers to the “evidence that children and adults ‘reify’ social formations by apprehending them as something other than social products.” The tendency to externalize some norms may be part of this broader inclination to reify.”

Questions: Does your realization of the mind-dependence of our currency’s value lessen your desire for money or the seriousness of your financial concerns? Why then should your realization of the mind-dependence of our moral norms mitigate your commitment to acting morally? Isn’t the social existence of these norms sufficiently real to generate the necessary commitment? Alternatively, does the realization that moral norms are dependent on our individual psychologies make you more tolerant of alternative systems of moral norms? Think about the difference between non-moral conventions and moral norms in this regard. There are no campaigns to end “close talking” in countries that find this normal. But campaigns to extend women’s rights to education, work and political representation to traditional societies are common. What’s the difference? Can one commit to extending women’s rights into societies that do not recognize them without “externalizing” the moral rights in question?

8. How Much Normativity?

O’Neill and Machery discuss moral disagreement. All cultures have norms related to reproduction and sexual intercourse. Indeed, our primate ancestors observe norms against incest insofar as they avoid inbreeding by sending males outside their troop to find mates. But there are of course huge differences between the sexual norms observed by the different cultures that exist at this time, and there have been enormous changes in the sexual norms observed by our culture as it has developed over time.

Some theorists treat these differences as brute reflections of the relativity of moral or social norms. Others see them as uniquely appropriate responses to different challenges faced by different communities or the same community at different times in its history.

O’Neill and Machery focus on a distinct issue: which “areas” of human life do communities subject to norms or rules? “Haidt et al Five foundations theory: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. It has long been agreed that all cultures have values and norms related to harm, care, fairness, and justice (for harm, see Turiel, 1983; for fairness, see Baumard, 2010). More recently, moral foundations theory has proposed that in addition to harm/care and fairness/cheating, all humans also have values and norms related to ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. (A domain associated with liberty is sometimes added). The first two foundations are proposed to be related to the concerns of individuals—they are “individualizing” in Graham et al.’s (2009) terminology—while the latter three are focused on strengthening groups and institutions—they are “binding.”

In addition, there are some other types of concerns that do not fit neatly into moral foundations theory yet also appear (based on anthropological evidence) to be cross-cultural universals.

These include concern for some form of privacy ([Altman, 1977](#); [Margulis, 2009](#); [Vincent 2016](#)), respect for property ([Morris, 2015](#); [Stake, 2004](#); [Rochat et al., 2014](#)), and norms regulating communication and honesty ([Brown, 1991](#)).”

Political orientation makes more of a difference for the authority and purity foundations than for harm and fairness: “across cultures, the most intractable political debates are likely to involve concerns related to respect for traditions/authorities and physical/spiritual purity, while the greatest degree of moral commonality may be found in issues related to harm and care.”

Criticisms: What about the sharp disagreements about slavery that were only resolved in the US with war? What about the sharp disagreements about racial integration that were resolved (to the extent that they have been resolved) not through argument or easy agreement but through civil disobedience? Social justice and the extension of concern to “out group” members has been marked with intense conflict over the course of our history. Often, views that fall into distinct “foundations”—e.g. Confederate or segregationist views premised in the value of the Southern “way of life” and its dependence on slavery or segregation—have been used to thwart attempts at extending care norms and justice norms to everyone in a population (e.g. the U.S.).

A. Some cultures are more “rule heavy” than others: “In addition to the variation in emphasis on different domains of normativity, there is noteworthy variation by culture in how much of life is governed by norms. [Edel and Edel \(1968\)](#) note that cultures differ on what sort of behavior may be evaluated; some societies tend to pass judgment on norm violations more than others. Among the societies that normativize more activities are “Puritan” cultures (such as the Manus people of New Guinea and the Yurok of California), which emphasize thrift, sobriety, and hard work but also, more generally, individual responsibility and obligations. In contrast, in many cultures, members regulate each other less on these dimensions. Pueblo Indians may pass judgment on others’ observance of rituals but tend to refrain from interfering in their economic or sexual business ([Edel & Edel, 1968](#), 100).”

B. Cultures differ on the proper role and perspective of a judge: “Along with variation in how many activities are subject to evaluation, there is variation in who is expected to take action to enforce norms against whom in a given domain. The Chiga tolerate substantial “misbehavior” from a brother. Interestingly, [Edel and Edel \(1968\)](#) also think that the Western view that “it is the ‘disinterested spectator,’ non-kin, non-involved, who is most fit to pass critical moral judgments” is not widely shared (100–101).”

C. Cultures differ on the strictness of enforcement: “Finally, cultures vary in the “tightness (rigidly enforced rules and norms) vs. looseness (less rigid norms, more tolerance of deviance)” of their normative systems. States within the USA and nations around the world vary with respect to how tight or loose the dominant normative systems is, where tightness and looseness is a matter of “strength of social norms and tolerance of deviant behavior” ([Gelfand et al. 2011](#), 1101). Variation in tightness corresponds to people’s subjective sense that they can behave in various ways in a given situation (a construct called “situational constraint”) and with people’s self-regulation, dutifulness, and self-monitoring ([Gelfand et al., 2011](#); [Harrington et al. 2014](#)). Normative tightness is predicted by social and ecological factors, including ecological and historical threats.”

Questions: Look at these dimensions on which cultures vary with respect to their normative practices. For example, is there a way to argue that Puritan cultures are too rule heavy or that liberal cultures are too lax? Or do these reflections suggest a form of “pluralism” according to which different people are “right” to live by different standards, so long as they live in different contexts or cultures? Perhaps it’s ok for some moralities to be looser than others. But what

about cultures that permit some members to enslave or dominate other members? What if those who are thought to be justly dominated are women or minorities? Can they endorse the treatment to which they are subjected? We need to be careful not to treat societies as homogenous as a single country, state, city or region may contain some who accept a norm (perhaps because they benefit economically from its acceptance) and others who reject that norm and would love to see it abandoned (perhaps because its acceptance harms them in identifiable ways). What are the limits on the space of admissible or acceptable moralities? What are the limits on toleration? Must we tolerate those who are intolerant? Can we use these limits to frame universal moral principles or universal human rights?

A Pragmatic Conception of Externalization: S externalizes the claim that x is immoral just in case S judges herself to be justified in coercing those who x to stop them from engaging in the practice.

Suppose S judges that George is acting immorally in circumcising his daughters or that John is acting immorally in physically abusing his wife. S is committed to the **reality** of the immoral nature of harming these individuals if S is willing to cite this harm as justification for coercing George to stop circumcising his daughters or to justify coercing John to stop abusing his wife. We also externalize morality to some degree in conversation whenever we use it to describe the limits to our tolerance.

The rationale behind this characterization: If S arrests John and put him in prison and threatens George with imprisonment or the confiscation of his daughters if he does not refrain from circumcising them, S has harmed John and coerced George. To think of herself as justifiably harming John or coercing George in this way, S must have a very good reason for doing so long as she shares our first-order belief in the prima facie (or pro tanto) wrong of harming and coercing other people. S could not think of herself as justified in coercing George or harming John in this way if she regarded her belief in the immorality of domestic violence or female circumcision as very much like her belief in the disgustingness of picking one's nose or handling feces. Liberals are not comfortable citing disgustingness as a reason for coercion or punishment. They require harm or injustice or some factor that they think of as engaging the distinctively "moral" components of their sensibilities.

Questions: How does externalization as O'Neill and Machery characterize it relate to our pragmatic definition of externalization? Must we externalize our moral norms in the Kantian sense lent that expression by Stanford, O'Neill and Machery to rationally persist in using coercion (and its attendant harms) as a means to halting or punishing various acts?

Further Questions: How does the adoption of pacifism affect the externalization of a norm? Suppose I am willing to join MLKJ in using my body as an obstacle to business as usual and I speak on behalf of a change in norms but I do nothing to attack the person or character of anyone perpetuating what I conceptualize as injustice. Does this require a lesser degree of externalization in the Kantian sense defined by Stanford, O'Neill and Machery? Think about the gentle forms of coercion people use to enforce aesthetic norms. We criticize and promote music and movies and books where criticism and promotion are painful or pleasing as the case may be. Are there spectra of coercion and preference-independence and some pressure within moral psychology to match the degree to which one externalizes with the degree to which one is willing to use coercion to enforce a norm? Explain and evaluate the hypothesis that the "looseness" of a group's enforcement of morals is correlated with its members' views on the "preference-dependence" of the morals in question.