

What is morality? A historical exploration



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The objective of the article was to get more clarity on what morality is by addressing the question: 'Can, in spite of undeniable adaptation and change through the ages, core elements of morality be detected that might be regarded as constitutive of morality?' The method followed was to undertake a historical exploration of some of the pivotal factors contributing to the historical development of morality. An attempt was first made to identify the most important historical sources of morality. This was followed by a discussion of the social function and characteristics morality displayed in history. The article came to the conclusion that morality is a normative social institution with distinctive and stable core constituents: a core function of enhancing cooperation in communities by providing normative guidance to members on the fair advancement of wellbeing, a set of moral values attuned to the fulfilment of this function, a set of mechanisms to motivate people to act in accordance with the moral values and approved ways to make moral decisions in concrete situations based on the moral values. At the same time, morality is a flexible social institution that adapts to changes in the social and cultural environment.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The research undertaken in the article drew on research findings in the fields of religious ethics, philosophy, evolutionary ethics, and psychology. Research results present religious and philosophical ethics with the challenge to critically evaluate the conception of morality they take as point of departure.

Keywords: characteristics of morality; core elements of morality; definition of morality; function of morality; historical development of morality; origin of morality; sources of morality.

Introduction

When it comes to morality we are faced with a strange anomaly.¹ There is widespread acknowledgement that morality is indispensable in tackling the serious global problems we are faced with today. At the same time, we seem to have lost our grip on what morality is. We do not agree on what the defining criteria of morality are and we increasingly disagree on the moral values we should base our actions on. An obvious starting point in remedying the situation would be to get more clarity on what morality is.

In this article, an attempt has been made to get a better grip on morality by undertaking a historical exploration of some of the pivotal factors contributing to the historical development of morality. The aim of this article is, first and foremost, to determine whether morality in history manifested both variation and continuity, or, more precisely, whether, in spite of undeniable adaptation and change, some core ingredients of morality could be detected that might be regarded as constitutive of morality.

The exploration will start with a discussion of the historical sources of morality. The contemporary debate on the historical origin of morality will be attended to, but the discussion of the historical sources of morality will also be extended to include sources like religion and philosophy that influenced morality after its inception. In the second section the question, 'Does morality fulfil a particular core function in society?' will be addressed. The third section will discuss the characteristics of morality by addressing primarily the question: 'Could certain core elements of morality be identified?' In the fourth section, conclusions will be drawn on insights gained from the historical exploration of the nature of morality.

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1. This article is based on three papers I read in the second half of 2022, each concluding a seminar in a series of three seminars on the theme 'The emergence and conceptualisation of morality in history' at the University of Pretoria. The sub-theme of the first seminar was 'The emergence of morality', of the second 'The conceptualisation of morality in religion' and of third 'The conceptualisation of morality in philosophy'. I owe much to participants in the seminars for insights gained from their papers and inputs during discussions.

Note: Special Collection: Morality in history.

Sources of morality

The discussion on the sources of morality was in the past mostly reduced to a discussion on the origin of morality, which was, in turn, mostly overshadowed by a fierce debate between proponents of what Richard Kitcher calls the 'biological' hypothesis of the origin of morality (cf. Kitcher 2011:98) and proponents of what one could call the 'cultural' and the 'religious' hypotheses of the origin of morality. According to the biological hypothesis, the origin of morality is found in biological evolution, already before the evolution of *Homo sapiens* (cf. De Waal 2006:29–49). While according to the cultural and religious hypotheses, its origin is found exclusively in respectively culture (e.g. the social contract theory of Thomas Hobbes, cf. Hobbes [1956] 1996) or religion (e.g. the Divine Command Theory, cf. Frankena 1973:28–30).

A thorough recent account of the emergence of morality is found in Michael Tomasello's book *A Natural History of Human Morality*, published in 2016. Although Tomasello's account is based on available empirical evidence, he concedes that he could only provide a historical 'reconstruction' of the emergence of morality because of the sparsity of well-researched scientific evidence about the lives of early humans. In this historical reconstruction, he strives to do justice to valid claims made by proponents of both the 'biological' and 'cultural' hypotheses of the origin of morality. He proceeds from the assumption that a major part of the explanation for human moral psychology comes from processes of evolution by means of natural selection. But, importantly, in this case the selecting is not done primarily by the physical but rather the social environment. What he presents is an evolutionary story which focusses on two major transitions in the way early humans cooperated: a first step (initiated approximately 2 million years ago) in which early humans (hominids) began foraging cooperatively in some new ways and a second step (initiated approximately 150 000 years ago) in which modern humans ('homo sapiens') were obliged to develop new forms of cooperation. The search for appropriate forms of collaboration culminated in the formation of large-scale cooperative groups known as cultures comprising not only familiar individuals, but also in-group strangers.

The social outcome of early humans' adaptations for obligate collaborative foraging could, in Tomasello's view, be regarded as a kind of second-personal morality: the tendency to relate to others face-to-face, with a heightened sense of sympathy for (potential) partners and a sense of fairness based on a genuine assessment of both self and other as equally deserving partners in the collaborative enterprise (called 'self-other equivalence' by him) and innervated by a feeling of obligation. This kind of second-personal morality with collaborative partners was not yet a fully human morality, but it already had all of the important elements in nascent form. The social outcome of modern humans' adaptations for collaboration in large-scale cultural groups in meeting challenges of population growth and increasing

competition with other groups was what Tomasello calls an 'objective' morality of fairness, based on a heightened sense of the obligation to conform to the group and its conventional cultural practices to ensure the enhancement of the group's welfare. Individuals in a cultural group had to conform in order to advertise their identity with the cultural group's way of doing things, and in order to be in line with the group's social norms. Some social norms were only about conformity and group identity, but others touched on humans' senses of sympathy and fairness (inherited from early humans), and these became moral norms. As the collective intentionality and cultural common ground of modern humans created a kind of 'objective' perspective on things, modern human morality came to be characterised as objectively right and wrong.

It is clear from Tomasello's account of the origin of morality that he is of the opinion that morality developed only after the evolution of humans was initiated. It is also clear that he believes that a naturalistic, bottom-up account of the origin of morality suffices, and that there is no need to fall back on a supernatural, bottom-down religious account. Such a conclusion is corroborated by studies of early human communities. Early hunter-gatherer communities, like the San of Southern Africa, did not relate the moral values they recognised to the deities they believed in. Even much later, for example in Mesopotamian and Greek cultures, the gods were not regarded as originators of moral values, and certainly not as models of moral behaviour! In fact, they often exhibited downright immoral behaviour.²

This does not mean that all claims that religion is a source of morality should be rejected. The term 'source of morality' does not only refer to 'origin of morality'. Religion might not be the origin of morality but should surely be recognised as a 'source' of morality in other senses of the word. It, in history, certainly incorporated morality, influenced the understanding of morality, co-determined the content of moral values, played a strong motivational role in acting morally, and facilitated moral decision-making. And morality, on its part, also co-determined the nature of religions of which it formed an essential part. The claim that morality is wholly autonomous, fully independent from religion, and vice versa, is thus, at the least, one-sided.

Should Agustin Fuentes and Robert Bellah be right the phenomenon of religion itself does not need a supernatural explanation but could be regarded as a key outcome of the human niche, and the way humans 'exist' in the world. According to Fuentes, religion emerged in history from the human capacity for imagination and belief and the development of a new kind of semiosis, namely the use and creation of symbols. As a result, human beings are deeply immersed in a symbolic system, where imagination, hope and the symbols associated with them can maintain stability

²Gerda de Villiers in a paper on 'The conceptualisation of morality in Ancient Religions at the hand of the Gilgamesh Epic' read at a seminar on the theme 'The conceptualisation of morality in religions' at the University of Pretoria in September 2022, concludes: 'Like in the myths of ancient Greece and Egypt, also the deities in the Gilgamesh Epic do not set examples of moral conduct. They are much too similar to the humans they created!'

and meaning and provide the infrastructure for faith (Fuentes 2017, 2019). Bellah's 'bottom-up' account of the emergence of religion is based on the fact that human beings experience different 'realities': in daily life, dreams, play, art and music, rituals and religion. Whereas the reality of daily life, which includes the working life, is characterised by effort and anxiety, and human beings, by listening and making music, and participating in religious rituals, for example, can experience different more sublime realities (Bellah 2011). Should both morality and religion be key outcomes of the human niche, forming part of the human symbolic system, which provides meaning and stability, and should religion enable the experience of a more sublime reality, which includes visions of a better life, it comes as no surprise that morality and religions interacted in history and influenced one another.

The interaction of morality and religions took on different forms in history. Neither morality nor religion was clearly differentiated in hunter-gatherer societies. Both rather formed part of the undifferentiated normative social order of hunter-gatherer bands and undergirded the relatively egalitarian nature of such bands. Rituals, also those that we would call religious, played a role in the legitimation of the existing normative social order and in this way contributed to the sense of identity of the band and closer cooperation within the band.

Considering that modern humans only evolved approximately 150 000 years ago and were hunter-gatherers for the longest part of that period, it is safe to say that it took a long time for religion and morality to be more clearly disentangled. They were strongly intertwined and coordinated with one another. Both played an indispensable role in strengthening the sense of identity of a particular community and in promoting cooperation within such a community. As Robert Bellah points out in his book *Religion in human evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (2011), the legitimation of the existing social order of a particular society by religion proceeded also after distinctive religious institutions and a class of religious officials emerged in societies. After the advent of agriculture approximately 15 000 years ago, city states took shape that were characterised by much stronger hierarchical social orders than those of hunter-gatherer societies. Religions, and in particular religious rituals, also in those city states, played a central role in legitimising the existing hierarchical social orders (See Bellah 2011:210–264). It was only in the so-called Axial Age, starting approximately 600 BCE that there were attempts in Juda, India, and China to abolish the subservience of religion to the existing political and social orders in society, and to create a more independent role for morality. This was done, among others, by certain religions claiming for their distinctive message (including their religious morality), a more universal validity and applicability (Bellah 2011: 265–566). But, as we all know, even in Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, and major religions that originated later, like Christianity and Islam, there is up till

today the persistent tendency to religiously support and legitimise the existing political and social orders of particular societies (cf. Harari 2018:127–138).

What Bellah also demonstrates is that in many religions there were also what he calls the religious 'renouncers' – prophets, monks, and not least, scribes – who criticised the extravagances, greed, power-hunger, belligerence, exploitation, and oppression of rulers and the privileged classes in their society.³ They kept alive the moral ideals of egalitarianism and care for the weak in society, and the vision of a more peaceful society. And they preached the virtues of temperance and abstention. They increased their influence, among others, by founding alternative religious orders and communities that strived to live in accordance with these moral ideals and values. Most importantly, they incorporated their criticism of existing rulers and privileged classes and the moral ideals and values they preached in religious writings that in due time were recognised as part of the authoritative scriptures of the major religions. To justify the validity of the moral ideals and values they preached, they in their writings sometimes made use of narratives of a deity or deities criticising the extravagances, violence and exploitation of rulers and ruling classes, and exhibiting behaviour in accordance with such moral ideals and values.⁴

In what sense could philosophy be said to be a source of morality? Just as in the case of religion, it would not make sense to say that the origin of morality is found in philosophy. Philosophy developed even later in human history than religion and long after the emergence of morality as social phenomenon. The Greek founders of Western philosophy, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, did not claim that moral virtues originate in human reason. They rather endorsed virtues recognised in Ancient Greek societies. What they, however, did was to deliberately introduce human reason as the final arbiter regarding morality.

Existing misunderstandings of the virtues were critically discussed, and the major virtues were identified and articulated (cf. Malik 2014:17–43; Rowe 1993:121–132). Even more importantly, philosophy from its inception in Greece until at least the late 19th century unequivocally substituted human reason for religious and cultural institutions as the final authority for justifying morality. While not so much denying that moral values could have other sources than reason, only those values that could pass the test of rational justification were recognised by philosophy as universally valid moral values. In enlightenment philosophy, the claim that cultural and religious traditions could be regarded as legitimate contexts of justification for morality was explicitly rejected.

3.The importance of the renouncer role, as envisioned by such scholars as Dumont and Thapar, is that it allowed the possibility of viewing the entire tradition and the society that embodied it from the outside, so to speak. Renouncers viewed traditional society as imperfect, as not the only way life can be lived ...' (Bellah 2011:527).

4.By presenting Jahwe as both a model of just and merciful behaviour and a critic of unjust and merciless human behaviour, the prophets of the Hebrew Bible provide a clear example.

The different normative ethical theories in philosophy provided different rational justifications of morality and recognised different sets of universally valid moral values. The most influential of them developed distinct ethical traditions with a strong impact on moral thinking in wider society. The virtue ethics of the Greek philosophers, and especially Aristotle, was for almost two millennia the dominant ethical tradition in Western societies, with a strong impact on the moral theology of the Roman Catholic Church. Examples of other normative ethical theories that at some stage exerted considerable influence on ethical thinking in wider society – and to a certain extent are still influential today – are Stoicism, social contract theory, Kantian deontology, and utilitarianism. Thus, just like religion, philosophy must be recognised as an important source of morality. It is an important source of morality in that it provides rational clarification and justification of morality and in creating new moral traditions, with their own distinctive sets of moral values.

What cannot be left out of the equation is that both the claim that morality can be justified on the basis of reason alone and the claim that moral values thus justified have universal validity have been questioned from the late 19th century onwards. The masters of suspicion, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud each in their own manner argued that Western morality is not based on reason alone, but rather on other factors relating to the interests and prejudices of certain groups or institutions: legitimising the resentment of weaker classes in society (Nietzsche 2008), the economic privilege of the affluent classes (Marx), or the suppression of natural desires championed by religion (Freud). Western morality should thus not be regarded as universally valid as it serves only certain groups or institutions in society.⁵ Post-modernism and communitarianism carried this criticism further. Post-modernist philosophy challenged the idea of a reason that operates free from cultural presuppositions and prejudices based on interests (Derrida & Stoker 2007; Foucault 1972; Lyotard 1984). Where enlightenment philosophy rejected the validity of culturally and religiously based ethical traditions, communitarian philosophy reaffirmed such traditions as legitimate sources of morality and legitimate contexts of justification of moral values (MacIntyre 1984; Sandel 1998, 2009; Taylor 2003).

Function(s) of morality

It is safe to say that most experts on the evolution of humans would agree with Agustin Fuentes that it is the 'creative collaboration' of humans that distinguishes them from other species and in the past enabled them to adapt so much better than other species to changing circumstances (Fuentes 2017:2). That morality – initially still part and parcel of the social values of communities – played a major role in facilitating the cooperation between human beings, is

5. Allen Wood aptly summarises the drift of their criticism of Western morality: 'Marx belongs to a radical tradition of modern thought about morality – a tradition which also includes Hegel, Nietzsche and Freud – thinkers who have made us painfully aware of the ways in which the moral life involves us inevitably in irrationality, self-opacity and self-alienation' (Wood 1993:522–523).

something on which many experts also agree. A research team in Anthropology from Oxford comes to a similar conclusion after studying a number of recent publications on morality from different academic disciplines. To quote them: 'A common view in this body of work is that the function of morality is to promote cooperation' (Curry, Mullins & Whitehouse 2019:47).

The research team from Oxford call their own theory of morality 'the theory of morality-as-cooperation', in my opinion a rather unfortunate depiction as it creates the wrong impression that they equate morality with cooperation. What they rather want to underline with this depiction is that it is the multiple solutions to problems of cooperation, consisting of a collection of instincts, intuitions, inventions, and institutions, that constitute human morality (Curry et al. 2019:n48). However, this, in turn, raises the further question whether all solutions to cooperation could be equated with morality. Those of us who find Michael Tomasello's account of the emergence of morality convincing would not answer in the affirmative. According to him, all social norms playing a role in creating and strengthening group identity contributed to cooperation in communities. Not all of these social norms could, however, be regarded as moral norms. Moral norms can, in his opinion, be distinguished from social norms, which facilitate cooperation by merely promoting conformity, in that they facilitate cooperation specifically by advancing wellbeing, in the case of the morality of sympathy the wellbeing of both the moral agent and his or her partner, and in the case of the objective morality of fairness also the wellbeing of other community members and the community as a whole.

Tomasello, as I read him, goes also one step further in ascribing to morality not only the function of advancing collaboration in the community by advancing the wellbeing of members of the community and the community as a whole, but also by qualifying this function as the advancement of collaboration by means of the *fair* advancement of wellbeing in the community. One can also put it this way: fair advancement of wellbeing is, for Tomasello, a constitutive function of morality since its evolution. There is, in my opinion, no reason to disagree with him. With the gradual transfer in evolution of the steering role of instincts in human behaviour to newly evolved psychological capacities, humans were increasingly confronted with the problem of finding the right balance in the advancement of their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. It is hardly surprising that the moral norms they adopted to guide their actions also dealt with fairness.

What should, however, be added is that for the longest part of human history, moral norms, like all other social norms, had the function to advance collaboration among the members of a specific community, and not so much with members of other communities. They did this, like other social norms, by building a strong sense of identity *within* the community and *over against* other communities that were in

competition with them. The fair advancement of wellbeing it promoted was for the most part restricted to members of a particular community. This was also true during those periods in history when morality was incorporated in religions, and religious morality was the dominant form of morality. It only changed when the close link of religion with the advancement of the interests of a specific community or society was to some extent severed since the Axial Age. Since then the function of morality, including religious morality, was adapted in certain major religions to also advance the fair treatment of people across national, cultural, ethnic, and religious borders.⁶ However, the tension between giving priority to the advancement of the wellbeing of the members of one's own cultural, ethnic or religious group, and advancing the wellbeing of all people without discrimination, has remained in religions up till today. There are prescriptions in the authoritative writings of some of the major religions that seem to be in tension with a universalistic understanding of the function of morality in that they give priority to the advancement of the wellbeing of family members and members of the own religious and cultural communities.

One of the results of the embeddedness of morality in religions and the impact of religious beliefs about God, human beings and the world on religious morality is that wellbeing is often understood more comprehensively. Religions teach that the wellbeing of people should not be understood in terms of only material, psychological and social wellbeing, but also of spiritual wellbeing or fulfilment. Religions also add new functions to morality, apart from the function of the fair advancement of the wellbeing of all people. Acting in a morally righteous manner could also function to, among others, achieve holiness, moral and spiritual perfection, or deification, realise God's will in the world, serve the Kingdom of God, increase one's karma to ensure an advantageous reincarnation, or to achieve the reward of eternal heavenly life. Several of these functions of morality could be at play at the same time, so that religions often have a layered understanding of the function of morality.

It would go too far to say that all philosophies subscribe to the view that the main function of morality is the fair advancement of wellbeing in the community. Kantian philosophy, for one, would reject this as being based on an unacceptable heteronomous understanding of morality. What one could say is that many philosophical traditions in one way or another support the view that morality has as goal the advancement of wellbeing. This is clearly the case in the virtue ethics of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Attaining 'eudaimonia', translated as wellbeing, flourishing or fulfilment, was for them the main goal of living virtuously. This view found support among numerous philosophers and theologians for a long period in history, as the virtue ethics

6. Robert Bellah presents the Confucian ideal of *ren* [humaneness] as an example of the universalisation of the scope of morality in the Axial Age: "Though rooted in embodied, social, life, it is nonetheless universal. Herbert Fingarette, who is generally believed to subordinate *ren* to *li*, nevertheless gives a definition of *ren* that epitomises its claim to universality: "society is men treating each other as men." Almost Kantian, treating other human beings as ends in themselves' (Bellah 2011:413).

tradition remained the dominant ethical tradition in the Western world for almost two millennia. Also, in other ethical traditions the advancement of a particular form of wellbeing takes central stage. In social contract theory, the implicit agreement of members of society to submit themselves to the common rule of authorities, laws and moral norms is based on the conviction that the prospects of a peaceful and prosperous life are dependent on it. In utilitarianism, only actions that contribute to 'the greatest good of the greatest number' as goal count as 'moral'. In Michelle Foucault's postmodern ethics, an important function of ethics is the advancement of the individual's fulfilment through self-formation (Foucault 1992:28, 35), while in contemporary versions of communitarian ethics the function of morality is to advance the wellbeing of all members of the community and the community itself. In the South American movement called 'buen vivir', which incorporates certain moral values from indigenous culture, acknowledgement is given to the importance of promoting inclusive 'spiritual' wellbeing, which entails not only harmony with fellow human beings, but also harmony with the natural environment and spiritual beings (Waldmüller & Rodriquez 2019:236).

Especially since the Enlightenment, there has been a shift in certain philosophies from the emphasis on the predominantly social function of morality (facilitating cooperation through the fair advancement of wellbeing in society) to a more individualistic view of this function as in the first instance serving the personal fulfilment of the individual. The roots of this shift can already be found in the virtue ethics of the Greek philosophers. For them the main goal of living a virtuous life was for the moral agent to attain 'eudaimonia', that is personal wellbeing or fulfilment. However, classical virtue ethics regarded the advancement of the wellbeing of fellow human beings as a pre-condition for the attainment of self-fulfilment. The contemporary philosophical school of the 'art of living', of which Joep Dohmen (the Netherlands) and Wilhelm Schmidt (Germany) are influential protagonists, on the contrary, one-sidedly lays all the emphasis on self-care and the cultivation of one's own personal freedom as the path to self-fulfilment or self-realisation (Van Tongeren 2013: 124-127).

Since the Enlightenment, another shift can also be noticed, namely a move away from the exclusive and limited emphasis on the advancement of the wellbeing of a particular cultural or religious community and its members, to a more inclusive and fair advancement of the wellbeing of all human beings. The extension of the applicability of moral norms to an ever-widening circle of human beings from all cultures, classes, genders, and races, happened gradually over a long period of time.⁷ Hans Jonas in his ethics of responsibility was one of the first philosophers to argue that the present generation of humans also have a moral responsibility to ensure a decent living for future generations (Jonas 1984). The utilitarian

7. In his book *The ethical project*, Philip Kitcher gives a brief account of the drawn-out historical processes leading to the emancipation of women and slaves in the Western world. These processes also involved the gradual extension of the scope of the application of moral norms such as charity and justice (Kitcher 2014:145-162).

ethicist Peter Singer makes out a case that moral norms also apply to animals (Singer 2009). And not only in the Western world, but also in other cultures (e.g. the 'buen vivir' movement in South America) the view that our moral responsibility also applies to the natural environment is becoming increasingly influential (Waldmüller & Rodríguez 2019:238–240).

Characteristics of morality

I take 'characteristics of morality' to refer to the features that distinguish morality as a normative social phenomenon from other such phenomena. In this section I will first discuss the differentiation of morality in history that went hand in hand with the drawn-out historical process of identifying its distinctive features. Next, I will discuss three distinctive core elements of morality that, in my opinion, all form part of it: a set of distinctive moral values, including moral norms, virtues and ideals; these being mechanisms introduced to motivate people to act in accordance with the recognised set of moral values (or moral codes) and approved ways of making moral decisions applying the set of moral values in concrete situations. In the past there has often been the tendency to equate morality with sets of moral values and disregard the fact that morality as a social phenomenon also includes the other two named elements, these being virtues and ideals.

Differentiation of morality

It took a very long time for morality to be clearly differentiated from other normative social institutions or systems. During the hunter-gatherer phase of human history, it formed part of the undifferentiated social order that provided normative guidance to the members of communities. Religious, political, economic, health and moral prescriptions, to name only a few of the sets of values that are today clearly differentiated, all formed part of the undifferentiated set of social norms, beliefs, and practices of a particular community. It is not that there were no norms, beliefs, and practices that we would today characterise as moral. Certain social norms, beliefs and practices of, for example, the San hunter-gatherer communities of Southern Africa unmistakably had as aim the fair advancement of wellbeing in the community and could thus be characterised as moral. In a study of the morality of the San, the art historian Alex Duffey (2022) comes to the following conclusion:

Community traditions ensure that everybody gets to share in what meat has been brought in. There are strong feelings about co-operation on the hunt: everybody must aim for the common good, rather than maximising their own hunting success at the expense of others' success. (n.p.)

Moral notions that played a guiding role in hunter-gatherer communities like the San were, however, not collected in separate codes and not named 'moral' or 'ethical'.

After the evolvement of distinctive religious institutions and offices with the establishment of agricultural societies, morality formed part and parcel of religions, and was initially

not clearly distinguished from other normative religious notions like prescriptions for ritualistic practices. Eventually a clearer distinction of moral prescriptions did take place within religions. An example of this outcome is the so-called second table of the Decalogue in the Hebrew Bible. Although the Decalogue is regarded as a religious code consisting of commandments of Jahwe, the first table spells out the obligations of faithful Israelites over against Jahwe, while the second table presents six fundamental moral obligations over against the neighbour. In the New Testament, the distinction of moral norms and virtues from especially ritualistic prescriptions proceeded further. Although the depiction of 'moral' or 'ethical' was not used by Jesus, moral guidance formed an important component of his message. He also explicitly awarded higher priority to the fulfilment of moral obligations than to the legalistic compliance with ritualistic prescriptions.

It is safe to say that the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' were first coined in philosophy, the term 'ethics' already in the 5th century BC in Greek philosophy. Philosophy has also since then been involved in systematic efforts to demarcate the field of 'ethics' and 'morality' more clearly. However, the goal of arriving at a unified understanding has proved to be an elusive one. One of the reasons is that a certain adaptation of moral philosophy to the reigning conception of morality in a particular society and time seems to be unavoidable. The Greek philosophers understood ethics in terms of the virtues recognised in Greek societies, while Immanuel Kant understood morality in terms of duties as was the case in the Lutheran Protestantism of his time. A second reason is that in philosophy, just like in religion, views on human beings and the world, held by the philosopher involved, have an impact on his or her understanding of morality. A third reason, demonstrated by the debate between John Rawls and communitarian philosophers like Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel, is that philosophers differ on whether morality should be defined in terms of universal moral values, justified by reason alone, or rather in terms of the moral values of a particular community, justified only in terms of the moral tradition and the cultural and religious beliefs of the members of the community. As a result of this fundamental difference in the understanding of morality in contemporary moral philosophy, Jürgen Habermas (1993:7, 116–117), Bernard Williams (2011:1–24) and also Paul Ricoeur (1994:169–171) proposed that the term 'ethics' should be reserved for community-based values and the term 'morality' for universal values. Michael Walzer prefers to use the terms 'thick morality' and 'thin morality' for this distinction (Walzer 1994:xi).

It is, most probably, recognition of the inherently distinctive nature of morality, contributing to cooperation by providing normative guidance in communities on the fair advancement of wellbeing, that eventually led to its clear differentiation as value system. The differentiation went hand in hand with the allocation of greater authority – one may even say 'relative priority' – to moral values in that they override other types of social values that contravene them and have a wider applicability than other social values, in that they

apply to all spheres of life while other social values often only apply to a specific sphere of life (Hare 1963:168–169; Pettit 2018:16). With regard to the wider applicability, one can also put it this way: moral values have an ‘all-encompassing’ applicability – to use a term of the social scientist Peter Beyer (2001:266).

Moral norms

According to Webb Keane, religions played a significant role in the articulation and codification of moral norms (Keane 2016:199–215). Codification had the effect that those moral norms selected to form part of a code (e.g. the Decalogue in the Hebrew Bible) were recognised, not only in religious institutions, but often also in the society or societies in which the religion was dominant, as fundamental moral principles.

To a large extent, religions took over moral values from dominant cultures of their time and even from other religions. The Decalogue in the Hebrew Bible, for example, is partly based on moral guidelines from the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi. It is, therefore, not surprising that there is a certain overlapping or sharing of moral values by different religions. Especially moral values prohibiting harmful behaviour over against fellow human beings, such as lying, stealing, and destructive violence, are found in many religions (Smedes 1983:3). The borrowing was, however, done selectively and excluded social norms that did not correlate with central religious beliefs. Borrowed moral values were also integrated into the framework of religious beliefs about a deity or deities and salvation, the nature of human beings and the world, and thus provided with new connotations and new motivations. To act in accordance with the religious moral code is, for example, in Judaism to obey Jahwe’s commandments, in Christianity to fulfil the will of the Triune God, and in Islam to do the will of Allah. Even within different confessional groups of the same religion, different religious beliefs could bring about different understandings of the moral code. In Christianity, the Decalogue has been understood as a set of laws that should be strictly obeyed, but also as concretisations of the obligation to love one’s neighbour. It has been regarded as a set of prohibitions of harmful actions, but also as a set of instructions to positively contribute to the wellbeing of fellow human beings (Smedes 1983:13–16).

The religious articulation of moral norms often went hand in hand with a distinctive reinterpretation and even radicalisation of certain moral norms. An example is the norm of justice that was, in the Abrahamic religions, understood not so much in terms of even-handedness, but in terms of the special treatment of the weak in society. Justice only prevails when those who are in great need are treated with special care. Another example is the obligation to love one’s fellow human beings. In certain religious traditions, this obligation is radicalised to also include the obligation to self-sacrifice should the advancement of the wellbeing of others requires it. In some of the major religions, the scope of the obligation to love is also universalised to include even love for the enemy.

The Swedish theologian Arne Rasmusson narrates in a striking manner how the theology and ecclesiology of dissenting Protestantism and revivalist movements resulted in religious communities with strong identities and relative egalitarian and democratic structures, which in turn had a powerful moral transformative impact on the characters and political views of their members. It is not coincidental that many of the leaders of social movements that contributed significantly to three moral and social revolutions, namely the emergence of democracy, the abolishment of slavery, and women’s rights, came from these dissenting Protestant churches (Rasmusson 2022). These leaders of social movements bear witness to the impact that religious beliefs and practices had and could have, not only on the moral formation of believers, but on the moral transformation of wider society. They form part of the company of renouncers, of social critics, who upheld a moral tradition of egalitarianism, care, moderation and peaceability in many religions, a moral tradition that also exerted a significant influence in wider society and survives until today.

Like religion, philosophy also played a significant role with regard to the articulation of moral codes and specific moral values. The historical influence of the articulation of the four moral virtues of courage, moderation, justice and practical wisdom in Greek philosophy, which was later called the cardinal virtues, was already mentioned. Many other philosophers also contributed to the articulation of specific fundamental moral principles such as justice, benevolence and peace, and a fundamental moral concept such as rights. Special mention should also be made of the significant input philosophy made in drawing up professional ethical codes and identifying and clarifying the moral values on which different branches of Applied Ethics could be based.

This does not mean that there is consensus on the moral values that should be recognised, even among those philosophies that claim universal validity for the moral values they recognise and justify. Even when they agree that certain moral values or principles should be regarded as fundamental and universally valid, differences with regard to the interpretation of these values are found. An example is the moral principle of ‘justice’, which is differently articulated by John Rawls and Robert Nozick, two philosophers working within the broader liberal tradition (Nozick 1974; Rawls 1971). When socialist interpretations of justice are included in the comparison, differences are even more pronounced.

Moral motivation

Religion already in hunter-gather communities most probably played a role in motivating members of those communities to act in accordance with moral norms. This was done primarily by religious rituals that legitimated the normative social order of those communities, which included the moral norms of the community and by stories of ancestors who served as models of moral behaviour. When later in history distinctive religious institutions were established, religions began to play a much more pronounced role in this

regard. A number of ways in which religions played a motivational role through the ages are listed below briefly:

- It might be that one of the most important mechanisms introduced by religions in this regard was to legitimise moral codes by ascribing it to certain authorities: by proclaiming that moral norms were the commandments or laws of God or gods, that the ruler who promulgated the moral code was ordained by God or gods, that the moral code was prescribed by holy scriptures, or that the moral code was officially approved by the highest authority or authorities of the religious institution.
- Religions also made use of the reward–punishment scheme to motivate believers to act in accordance with moral norms. Acting in a morally righteous manner could lead to a blissful eternal afterlife, a more advantageous reincarnation, and recognition by authorities of religious institutions and fellow believers, while immoral behaviour could lead to eternal punishment in the afterlife, a less advantageous reincarnation, exclusion from participation in religious rituals, ostracising from the religious community and loss of reputation.
- Measures were introduced to strengthen the moral conscience of believers to cultivate greater moral sensitivity and stronger feelings of guilt when the moral code is transgressed. This was done, among others, by introducing the belief in the all-seeing eye of a deity who could detect and punish even moral transgressions done in secrecy. The moral conscience was, however, also strengthened by informal and formal moral education. Informal moral education took the form of stories about the actions of wise or holy people who could serve as moral models for religious people, while formal moral education took the form of explicit and direct instruction in the moral teachings of the religious institution. In either way, the moral education led to the internalisation of moral values and the inculcating of moral sensitivities and attitudes, or moral virtues.
- An alternative motivation for acting morally righteously was introduced during the Protestant Reformation, namely gratitude. This was to counter the Roman Catholic belief that believers could contribute to their own salvation by doing good works. Instead of being motivated to do good works to achieve salvation, believers should rather spontaneously do such works out of thankfulness for God’s gracious salvation (Vosloo 2022).

Many philosophers would strongly criticise these forms of religious motivation to act in a morally right manner. In their opinion, moral motivation should not be based on external factors such as God’s authority or oversight or fear of punishment, but solely on the consideration that an action is morally right. On this, philosophers as far apart as Immanuel Kant and Michel Foucault agree (cf. Hofmeyr 2022). They do not, however, agree on the reasons for regarding an action morally right. An Aristotelian virtue ethicist would regard virtuous actions that contribute to the attainment of the highest good, namely ‘eudaimonia’, as morally right, while a

utilitarian ethicist would do so when an action contributes to the ‘greatest good of the greatest number’. Immanuel Kant would find both these justifications for morally right actions, and motivations based on such justifications, unacceptable because they are in his opinion heteronomous in nature. Only justifications and motivations based on autonomy, that is, the moral will acting on the categorical imperative as a law unto itself, would, in his opinion pass the test (Kant 2005).

Most communitarian ethicists would be more sympathetic to motivations to act morally right, introduced by religions. They would regard the foundation of moral motivation solely on the moral rightness of actions inadequate in that it could not provide ordinary people in every-day circumstances with a strong enough motivation to act morally right. They would rather agree with Elizabeth Anscombe that moral philosophy of necessity presupposes a moral authority or ‘law-giver’, whether that authority is the moral tradition of a particular community, a religious scripture or God (Anscombe 1958:1–19). And they would argue that ordinary people could only be strongly motivated to act morally right by means of effective moral formation and moral education, based on the moral tradition of the community and provided by families, religious and educational institutions.

Moral decision-making

Religions have in history played an important role in guiding people on how to make the right moral decisions. They have done this in several ways:

- Stories were told about virtuous ancestors, wise people and moral heroes, both orally and scripturally. These stories not only held up models of virtuous conduct that could be imitated and motivate those hearing or reading them to act morally righteously. They also provided guidelines and models on how to make the right moral decisions. One influential and widespread format of literature was wisdom literature that in anecdotal format provided examples of wise decision-making in everyday life situations.
- Part of the more formal moral education provided by religious institutions to especially children was often also instruction on how to make the right moral decisions. In some religious institutions, religious scholars developed guidelines on the steps that should be taken in moral decision-making to ensure the right outcome. In, for example, Roman Catholic moral theology, a field of study, called ‘casuistry’, was at some stage introduced, that devoted itself to the development of such guidelines (Curran 1999:164–165).

In philosophy, considerable attention has been given to moral decision-making. On one end of the spectrum of views one finds the virtue ethics approach. According to virtue ethics, individuals through moral education and moral self-formation develop moral habits that guide them to spontaneously act in certain characteristic ways. On the other

end of the spectrum is the view, among others, held by Kantian and utilitarian ethics, that moral decision-making should be based on a certain deliberate and rational process of decision-making. Kantian ethics teaches that individuals should base their moral decisions on the strict application of relevant moral norms that stood the test of the categorical imperative. No consideration should be given in decision-making to the consequences of different options for action. In the approach of utilitarian ethics, it is exactly the consequences of different options that stand central in the decision-making process. Moral decisions should be based on the evaluation of which of the options for action contributes most to the greatest good of the greatest number.

Formal religious and philosophical instructions regarding moral decision-making are today challenged by research results in the neurosciences and moral psychology on how moral decision-making actually takes place. The moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt comes to the conclusion that research results show that by far the majority of our everyday moral decisions are not made in a deliberate and methodical manner. We make such decisions mostly in a spontaneous, almost automatic manner. When confronted with a typical situation in which we have to decide what to do, certain moral emotions are evoked in the brain that without conscious deliberation result in a decision to act in a particular way (Haidt 2012:61–83). These research results, on the face of it, support religious and philosophical views on moral decision-making in which the moral formation of the youth and the inculcation of moral virtues stand central. Should moral psychologists like Haidt be correct, the most effective way of ensuring right moral decisions would be to see to it that especially the youth is submitted to strong moral formation. According to the philosopher Mark Johnson, this does not mean that there is no role anymore for deliberate and rational decision-making. He argues that there is still:

[A] key role for a process of moral deliberation that is more than just intuitive, nonconscious judgment, and also more than mere after-the-fact justification by principles. It is a reflective process of deliberation concerning which possible courses of action available in a given morally problematic situation would best harmonize impulses, values and ends. (Johnson 2014:90)

The need for such a process of moral deliberation arises when people are confronted with an unfamiliar situation, a conflict of moral values, new problems, or differences of opinion on what the morally right thing to do is. It is then that, as Philip Pettit puts it, red lights go on that one should not rely on ingrained emotional dispositions to spontaneously act in typical ways (Pettit 2018:328).

Conclusion

From our account of morality in history, we can conclude that morality exhibits both continuity and variation.

The following core constituents of morality have been identified:

- Although it has certain roots in animal evolution, morality is a typical human phenomenon that presupposes cognitive and psychological capacities only humans have at their disposal. It has as core function the enhancement of cooperation in communities (but also in other social contexts like national and global societies, organisations and professions) by providing normative guidance to members on the fair advancement of wellbeing. It could thus be depicted as a normative social phenomenon – one could also say: a normative social institution – that has in history operated primarily within communities and other social contexts. At the same time, morality also plays a key role in individual persons' identity formation. Being regarded as a person of moral integrity in the community, enhances the respect of fellow-members for the individual and becomes part of the identity she or he strives to attain and maintain.⁸
- Morality consists of three core elements: a set of distinctive moral values, a set of mechanisms to motivate people to act in accordance with this set of values, and approved ways to make moral decisions applying the set of moral values in concrete situations. Despite differences there were often overlapping of moral values, motivational mechanisms and approved ways of making moral decisions between different cultures, religions and philosophies.
- Morality has a stronger authority than other types of normative social institutions or orders in that it has all-encompassing validity in all spheres of life and overrides contradicting values. This authoritative priority is, however, a relative, accommodative one in that morality provides a moral framework that demarcates the borders within which other normative social institutions or orders could still operate.

One can say that it is only normative social institutions with this distinctive social function, these distinctive elements and this authoritative priority that deserve to be called morality.

What has also become clear in the historical account of morality is that its core characteristics and elements, which constitute a certain continuity, do not rule out variation:

- It is probably safe to say that in early human history, morality fulfilled its core function exclusively in particular cultural communities and that such community-based moralities were regarded as valid only for members of the specific communities – and people assimilated from other communities. In due course, some moralities based on a particular culture or religion claimed universal validity for all human beings. And eventually in philosophy, the claim was made for the universal validity of a particular morality as being based on reason alone. As the historical account indicates, quite a few complementary functions were added to the core function of morality by different religions and philosophies. There were also different understandings of the human wellbeing morality serves, stretching from material wellbeing to spiritual wellbeing. In some

⁸ Philip Pettit goes so far as to say: '... a reason to be moral is that it is the only way of achieving integration or integrity as a person' (Pettit 2018:299).

instances, the core function of morality was extended to include the wellbeing of animals and the natural environment. And finally, the advancement of the own wellbeing of the individual agent (and next of kin) and the advancement of the other were weighed differently. At one end of the spectrum, the emphasis was on the advancement of the wellbeing of the other, especially the suffering other, while at the other end, the emphasis was rather on the advancement of one's own wellbeing.

- Even in the case of the overlapping of moral values, different connotations were often given in religions and philosophies to moral values prescribing the same deeds. Different beliefs about the transcendent, humans and the world could also lead to different articulations of a particular moral value (e.g. justice) and to the formulation of new and distinctive moral values. There were periods in history when moral values were understood primarily in terms of moral virtues, while in other rather in terms of moral duties. Different religions and philosophies often made use of different combinations of motivational mechanisms, and certain religions and philosophies prioritised deliberate moral decision-making processes, while others relied mostly on spontaneous decision-making based on inculcated virtues.
- The strength of the authority granted to morality also varied in different religions, cultures and philosophies. The authority could be weak in that recognition of the priority of moral values over other social values was not consistently maintained, or the all-encompassing applicability of moral values in certain life spheres (such as politics and the economy) underplayed. At the other side of the spectrum, the authority of morality could be emphasised so strongly that the authority and validity of other sets of values was undermined (e.g. in certain forms of moralism).

Where do the limits to this variation regarding morality lie? Can one say that the depiction 'morality' does not apply when all or some of the following deviations from the norm apply: the distinctive function of providing guidance with regard to the fair advancement of wellbeing is denied or completely overridden by other functions, the sets of values and motivational mechanisms and approved ways of decision-making do not serve this distinctive function, the priority of moral values over other types of values is denied or the authority of moral values absolutised to such an extent that the result is a pan moralistic fundamentalism neglecting the validity of other types of values?

Based on the conclusion, the following definition of morality is offered:

Morality is a normative social institution with distinctive and stable core constituents: a core function of enhancing cooperation in communities by providing normative guidance to members on the fair advancement of wellbeing, a set of moral values attuned to the fulfilment of this function, a set of mechanisms to motivate people to act in accordance with the moral values and approved ways to make moral decisions in concrete situations based on the moral values. As distinctive normative social institution it has higher

authority than other normative social institutions. At the same time morality is a flexible social institution that adapts to changes in the social and cultural environment, and as a result also exhibits variation within limits set by its core components. (n.p.)

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