

WHY IT'S OK: THE ETHICS AND
AESTHETICS OF HOW WE LIVE



Why It's OK to Be Amoral



RONALD DE SOUSA

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Why It's OK to Be Amoral argues that self-righteous moralism has replaced religion as a source of embattled and gratuitous certainties. High-minded moral convictions invoke the authority of sacred moral truths, but there are no such truths. In reality, moral passions are rooted in atavistic emotional dispositions and arbitrary social conventions.

While public and private discourse is saturated with guilt, shame and righteous indignation, professional philosophers, under cover of clever argumentation, promote the utopian idea that all practical questions have uniquely right answers—providing that you adopt the right moral principles. But their justifications for those principles appeal to contested ‘foundations’, among which no rational adjudication is possible. Moreover, because there are two discrepant ways of understanding motivation, our access to agents’ true reasons is never sufficiently reliable to warrant moral praise or blame. Finally, every agent has a wide diversity of reasons for action, yet moralists claim that some reasons trump all others, because they are ‘moral’ reasons. Since these too must be grounded in facts, that amounts to double counting some reasons.

Having exposed these aspects of the institution of morality, this book suggests that if we cannot abstain altogether from moralising, we can at least try to use it against itself.

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Why It's OK: The Ethics and Aesthetics of How We Live

ABOUT THE SERIES:

Philosophers often build cogent arguments for unpopular positions. Recent examples include cases against marriage and pregnancy, for treating animals as our equals, and dismissing some popular art as aesthetically inferior. What philosophers have done less often is to offer compelling arguments for widespread and established human behavior, like getting married, having children, eating animals, and going to the movies. But if one role for philosophy is to help us reflect on our lives and build sound justifications for our beliefs and actions, it seems odd that philosophers would neglect arguments for the lifestyles most people—including many philosophers—actually lead. Unfortunately, philosophers' inattention to normalcy has meant that the ways of life that define our modern societies have gone largely without defense, even as whole literatures have emerged to condemn them.

Why It's OK: The Ethics and Aesthetics of How We Live seeks to remedy that. It's a series of books that provides accessible, sound, and often new and creative arguments for widespread ethical and aesthetic values. Made up of short volumes that assume no previous knowledge of philosophy from the reader, the series recognizes that philosophy is just as important for understanding what we already believe as it is for criticizing the status quo. The series isn't meant to make us complacent about what we value; rather, it helps and challenges us to think more deeply about the values that give our daily lives meaning.

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A few preliminary remarks are called for about the terminology used in this book, its intended readership and the spirit in which it is written.

To begin with terminology. Of the three terms, ‘morality’, ‘ethics’ and ‘metaethics’, the first two are often equivalent, making the phrase ‘moral and ethical’—like ‘freedom and liberty’—little more than a pleonasm. Some wag noticed that ‘ethics violations’ are usually about money and ‘immorality’ is usually about sex. But when philosophers recognise a distinction, they are likely to think of morality as a set of rules, and of ethics as reflecting on much broader questions about how to live. In the latter sense, a concern with ethics is compatible with the rejection of morality that is amoralism (Marks, 2012).

As for ‘metaethics’, as the prefix ‘meta’ suggests, it is about ethics rather than part of it. It aims to explain what is distinctive about moral statements, oughts, values and principles.

Strictly speaking, while I am concerned to reject the need for and the authority of moral rules, much of what I have to say is about metaethics. But morality and metaethics have a way of seeping into one another’s territory. Both Utilitarianism and Kantian Deontology, for example, belong strictly speaking to metaethics. But each has consequences for the moral question of what ought to be done or may be

done in specific circumstances, and the precepts generated by different metaethical theories often conflict. So as to avoid getting lost in unnecessary quibbles, I will refer to ‘moral systems’ or ‘moral theories’ to denote systematic elaborations that in some cases might more precisely be classed as part of morality, while in others they would be better classed as pertaining to metaethics.

This book is a polemic. It is intended for readers who may wonder about what we mean when we talk about what morality commands or forbids, and what delimits the domain of moral as distinct from aesthetic, practical, personal or other domains of life we care about. My first contention is that among the general public a preoccupation with what is morally right or wrong, as opposed to all other reasons to care and to act, obscures rather than clarifies our judgments about what we have good reasons to do. My second claim is that the philosophers who have made a profession of justifying moral claims are doomed to keep thrashing in a morass of mutual question-begging. Among the rest of us, the supposed authority of morality encourages moralism, the self-righteous intrusion of guilt and blame, into every facet of our public and private lives.

By ‘our’, I mean to refer mainly to persons who, like me, live in a WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic) culture (Henrich, 2020). Although I shall sometimes refer to the diversity of existing cultures, and occasionally even to some non-WEIRD practices, that is the point of view from which I write, with all the limitations that implies.

To acknowledge those limitations, as well as those that derive from the accident of being an old, white, middle-class, European male, is to hint at the outset at my scepticism in

regard to the prejudices and assumptions instilled into me, like anyone else, by the upbringing and life experience randomly allotted to each human being.

Although little I write in this book is original, I have been sparing in providing references, perhaps to the point of seeming ungrateful to the many writers who have said things I assert or discuss. Among those whose work has influenced me but to which I have not done justice, I must mention especially the authors of essays collected in the fine anthology edited by Richard Garner and Richard Joyce (Garner & Joyce, 2019), as well as to Joel Marks (Marks, 2012, 2016). Instead of listing all individual works to which I am indebted, I have wherever possible recommended entries from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The SEP presents several advantages: it maintains extremely high standards of professional competence, and endeavours to remain scrupulously up-to-date by requiring periodic revisions of all entries. It is freely available to anyone who can access the Internet. And every entry includes a cornucopia of citations and further readings. I have tagged SEP references by adding an asterisk to those citations.

A few friends and colleagues have very generously suffered through earlier drafts of this book in part or whole. In particular, I benefited from criticisms from Wayne Sumner, David Gallop, Robert D'Amico, Neera Badhwar and Christine Tappolet. I am especially indebted to Joel Marks, whose countless detailed and insightful comments on two successive drafts enabled me to make innumerable improvements in thought and diction, though not, I fear, to convince him that all his objections have been met.

I need to offer here a final note about the cover of this book. Those of you reading this in paperback or e-book form

will no doubt notice on the front cover the image of a person balancing unsupported in mid-air. It was suggested by my imaginative and wonderfully supportive editor, Andrew Beck, to evoke a central tenet of this book: that reliance on an objective morality to guide your life is like the confidence of a tightrope walker undertaking to tread on the void.

I also gratefully acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada, in the form of Insight Grant #43517022.

Never is evil done more thoroughly and gaily than by those who act on moral principle.

Blaise Pascal

Nowadays, everyone is a moralist. Or so it may seem from an hour or two of random browsing on the Internet. While many deplore the news that the Morality Police in Iran continue to arrest and torture women for letting a strand of hair show, Americans eagerly volunteer to serve in moral militias on both sides of America's culture wars. Books are banned, invective replaces argument, speakers are silenced, mobs get professors fired, and just last summer a commentator staged a public burning of a Barbie doll to express his moral outrage at a blockbuster family movie—all in the name of the epic struggle of Good against Evil.

Of course, this moral zeal may be no more genuine than professions of Christian faith in the service of bigotry. In practice, amoralists are not uncommon: we are the ones that refuse to be bullied by the self-righteous. If you are one, I hope merely to encourage you to remain so more thoughtfully.

Meanwhile, in academia, the commitment to morality is no mere pose. A recent biography of the late Derek Parfit (1942–2017), one of the most distinguished and appealingly eccentric philosophers of my generation, describes him as

having been on a 'Mission to save morality . . . from . . . various kinds of skepticism about the existence of objective, normative truths' (Edmonds, 2023). The three volumes of the book Parfit devoted to this mission total 1,980 pages, which is longer than the *Book of Mormon* (530 pages) plus the *Handbook of Scientology* (871 pages) put together. Saving morality turns out to be a long-winded business.

But what if morality didn't deserve to be saved? What if the rules and dictates of morality in the popular mind, as well as philosophers' sophisticated attempts to make sense of it systematically, merely exacerbate the appalling proliferation of abuse on social media, the spread of violence fuelled by political rhetoric, and the inability of politicians to agree on practical solutions to contemporary crises? Drawing up a persuasive indictment along these lines is beyond both my ambition and my powers. My hope in writing this book, more modestly, is to encourage you to see that your 'moral' reasons are not sanctioned by any objective moral facts. And that if you cannot tame your moralistic fervour, you can at least turn it against itself, rather than regard it as a source of smug self-satisfaction.

A SUMMARY ROAD MAP

In the next two chapters, I set the stage by sketching seven strategies that religious leaders and philosophers have adopted for answering the question 'Why should (or should I not) do X?' The answers in question are sometimes understood as explanations, but from the moral point of view they are intended to provide justifications. These comprise first, in Chapter 2, Divine Command Theory, two rather different ways of appealing to nature, Virtue Ethics and Contractarianism; they are followed in Chapter 3 by the main contenders today:

Utilitarian Consequentialism and Kantian Deontology. In addition, Chapter 3 sketches some variants of Noncognitivist views. These attempt to reinterpret moral discourse without being committed to any objective moral facts, and thus might be viewed as a first step towards amorality.

In Chapter 4, I will suggest that both the popular understanding of morality and the systematic attempts by philosophers to provide it with foundations are unacceptably totalising. They tend to encroach on every aspect of our lives, in ways that none but members of a cult should find attractive.

Chapter 5 delves into some of the complexities of our notion of reasons. In most systems of morality, the assessment of an agent's reasons for acting is a precondition of any judgment of moral responsibility. Understanding what reasons to act are and how we can evaluate them is therefore central to the project of determining the role that morality plays or should play in human life. Adopting a perspective inspired both by common sense and by the 'two systems' or dual processing view of thought and deliberation, we will see that one mode of action explanation appeals to reasons that are largely automatic and unconscious. That level of explanation has the best claim for representing the true causal background of our behaviour. Yet the reasons we make explicit when we attempt to justify what we do are often poor representations of those true reasons. The gap between the two, I shall argue, undermines the project of moral judgment.

Chapter 6 explores the implications of the relation between moral reasons and the natural facts on which they are typically based. Some reasons are said to be moral while others are not. Deciding which reasons are in each category—the problem of demarcation—is a task about which there is little consensus. It will prove to be a recurrent obstacle to the

project of making moral theory live up to its universalising ambition. Even if a clean criterion of demarcation were to emerge, we shall see that the relation between non-moral and moral reasons cannot reasonably license the latter to trump the former. For so-called moral reasons do not differ materially from the natural facts that are supposed to ground them. Talk of moral reasons therefore constitutes a kind of double counting that is both fallacious and largely ineffective. The fallacy consists in manufacturing a category of reasons that are 'grounded' in non-moral reasons we already have. The manoeuvre amounts to counting some reasons twice. It is also ineffective, insofar as an agent is unlikely to be swayed by the mere application of the label 'moral' onto a reason the force of which never moved them in the first place.

Chapter 7 focuses on the two most influential traditions of moral philosophy and their preoccupation with foundations. Because foundational principles constitute the ultimate level of justification, no more basic shared criterion exists to arbitrate among all parties. While the resulting philosophical debates display impressive intellectual virtuosity, they present a sorry spectacle of justifying the obvious by question-begging appeals to the abstruse. In addition, the sociological profile of a 'morality' is too often alarmingly similar to that of certain kinds of fanaticism. Fascism, male supremacy, religious ideologies and sexual tyrannies display much the same psychological and social profile as does the consistent imposition of the benign morality you are likely to espouse. Some moralities are just bad, and philosophy's attempts to discriminate them from the 'good' ones are doomed to remain question-begging.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I will address the question of how a life might be lived without morality. In the light of my

argument about double counting, the life of an amoralist does not have to be deprived of good reasons, nor must it shun rational deliberation. What difference there is will be attributable to the amoralist's repudiation of the entitlement to indulge in the somewhat nasty emotions that drive moral passion. Those emotions power not just morality and moralising but fanatical cults. Guilt, shame, envy, contempt and resentment typically motivate moral judgments on oneself as well as others, and while they may sometimes function in useful ways, these emotions are in general more noxious than the ills they are claimed to mitigate.

So much for what is to follow. In the present chapter, I begin by clarifying some of the crucial terms that will come into play in the discussions to come. What is morality? Why does it seem to have two opposites, confusingly referred to as *immorality* and *amorality*? What is supposed to be the role of morality in human life, and what about that does an amoralist object to? We shall first look at the notorious question of the 'naturalistic fallacy', which concerns the possibilities of inference from statements of facts to statements of value or 'oughts'. An unbridgeable 'gap' has been held to separate them. With respect to what lies on the latter side of this gap, amoralists take a position sometimes called 'anti-realist' or even 'nihilist'; beyond that common ground, however, there can be differences between different versions of amorality.

ARE THERE MORAL FACTS?

Informally, we can all think of the oughts, shoulds and don'ts that make up morality as moral rules. Sometimes you feel these rules are pressing on you by the inner voice of conscience. When you fail to heed that voice, you may feel guilt,

and you blame others when they fail to heed what you think *their* conscience *should* have dictated. We associate morality with duties, obligations and prohibitions that conflict with inclination or desire. And we are easily disposed to believe that the oughts, duties and interdictions of morality are manifestations of the 'moral order'.

That moral order may well seem to be ruled by disinterested, rational principles based on incontrovertible moral facts. Regardless of how you feel on any particular occasion, is it not always true, as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow, that you should be kind, honest, fair? That you should avoid causing harm, do what is right and promote what we all know is good? Affirmative answers to these questions may strike you as obviously true, even when they conflict with your personal preferences. Although the empirical evidence about this is equivocal,¹ many ordinary folks, as well as philosophers—though far from all—are *realists* about morality. Realism in a given domain is the doctrine that the truths of that domain are independent of anyone's attitudes, emotions or beliefs. Realism is what common sense takes for granted about the truths of mathematics or physics: the facts uncovered in those fields would be what they are even if no one were here to think of them. Similarly, moral realism is the view that moral truths would be what they are even if no one knew or cared.

To be sure, scientific or mathematical facts are formulated in response to questions we ask. We might have asked different questions, and obtained different answers. But that is the only sense in which facts depend on us. Once a question is asked, the answer has nothing to do with what we want or believe. The answers are what they are regardless of how we feel about them. That is not to deny that the facts uncovered

by scientific inquiry, like the ‘facts’ of morality, are often disputed. Indeed, the very existence of a disagreement shows that all parties to the dispute agree that there is an objective fact of the matter. If not, there is nothing to disagree about. Facts should be reflected in opinion, but no ‘alternative facts’ can be created by opinion. They are *objective*, in a sense that contrasts with the range of states that we recognise as purely *subjective*, such as a preference for some flavour, some colour or some sensation. *De gustibus*, we are often told, *non disputandum*: it is pointless to argue about tastes. For a moral realist, moral values are not matters of taste. That is why they are worth arguing about.

The idea that moral facts are just like physical facts, however, ignores a fundamental difference. The latter are about what is, while the former are about *ought*: what I ought to do or not do, what ought to be, what values ought to be promoted or espoused. As David Hume (1711–1776) first pointed out, no purely logical inference is valid from a statement of what is to a statement of what *ought* to be. An inference of this kind, however plausible it may seem, commits what is traditionally referred to in philosophy as the *naturalistic fallacy* (see Box #1).

DIRECTION OF FIT

The distinction between factual beliefs on the one hand and wants—in the broadest sense of that word that includes wishes, hopes, desires and cravings—on the other is sometimes formulated in terms of an expression’s ‘direction of fit’. A factual statement is deemed correct only if its content conforms to or fits the way things are in the world. That reflects a minimal definition of truth: an utterance of ‘*p*’ is true if and only if *p* is the case. Thus, an expression with *mind-to-world* direction of fit is correct only if the mental state expressed conforms to

the way things are in the world, regardless of what we think or want. By contrast, when you utter an ought-statement, as in *There ought to be equality of opportunity*, the inequality that exists in the actual world does not invalidate your claim. The point of an ought-statement is precisely to call for the world to conform to what is called for in the utterance, not to conform to the world as it is. Ought-statements therefore have a world-to-mind direction of fit. What may obscure this is that value statements in general, such as ‘cruelty is contemptible’ or ‘this Rembrandt painting is beautiful’, have a surface grammatical structure that makes them look like factual claims with a mind-to-world direction of fit, but all of them have a world-to-mind direction of fit inasmuch as they implicitly call for the elimination of something that *ought-not-to-be*, or for the promotion or perpetuation of some state of affairs that *should* be promoted or pursued.

BOX #1 THE NATURALISTIC FALLACY

The naturalistic fallacy refers to the mistake of deriving normative statements (what ought to be) from descriptive statements (what is). Although the term was coined by G.E. Moore (1873–1958), the concept was first articulated by the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776). It never follows logically that just because something is a certain way, it ought to be that way—or any other specific way. This is also referred to as the ‘is-ought gap’. For example, consider the statement: ‘Animals in nature often kill each other to survive; therefore, it is morally acceptable for humans to kill each other.’ This is an example of the naturalistic fallacy because it assumes that the way things occur in nature automatically determines what is morally right or wrong for humans. Moral considerations are not solely determined by observations of the natural world. Additional ‘normative’ principles and values