

## Morality is neither an external object nor a personal preference, it's a simplifying framework

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The central question in meta-ethics, and arguably all of ethics, is the question of what moral statements refer to. Several candidates have been proposed, including Platonic objects, natural objects, commands, and personal preferences. The answer, I suggest, is that it is none of these. Rather, morality is a framework. We see this by looking at common moral terms: 'right' and 'wrong', 'justice', 'guilt', 'responsibility', 'blame', and 'rights'. These terms all have something in common: they are legal terms. Since morality dates to prehistoric times, it's easy to see where this could have come from: prehistoric societies observed nature acting in a 'court-like' way – for example punishing them for overhunting – and inferred that this was a larger version of their own tribunal processes. Thus, we can define morality as an anthropomorphic framework based on the analogy of a human court, applied to human behaviour and its relation to nature. The framework persisted through human religious history, with various gods being the lawmaker and judge.

This presents a problem: human society has worked hard to eliminate non-natural objects from our model of the world, replacing them with natural descriptions. Assuming we don't *really* believe nature is a giant court, the question is how we replace morality with a natural description. To do this, we need to look at what we are trying to describe through the framework, at a more detailed level than simply our relation to nature. There are two ways to get at this, and they lead to the same result, it seems. Firstly, we can treat morality as an attempt to describe patterns in our behaviour, for example the way human societies encourage or discourage certain behaviour through social pressures or punishment, and look for the most general description. Secondly, we can treat morality as an attempt to describe our emotions – or what one might call our 'moral intuition' – and look for the most general description, i.e., the 'highest good'. They lead to the same path because evolutionary theory shows that *all* our behaviour, including our emotions, has evolved as mechanisms to support human survival. Evolutionary theory demonstrates, even more clearly than what would have been apparent to prehistoric societies, that nature regulates human behaviour. Nature doesn't 'punish' us according to a set of moral laws, it adjusts our behaviour through natural selection when we are unfit for it. And there are no fixed court-like laws; when the environment changes so must we.

Replacing morality is similar to replacing theism. We adopt a natural (i.e., functional) framework for describing human behaviour and its relation to nature, and use gaps where we don't know. This is a better approach because it provides us with a methodology for finding out: empirical investigation. We need to give up the (implicit) idea that when we make moral statements we're conveying laws of a giant court, revealed to us through a mystical process of moral intuition. There is no such thing. Instead we must accept that when we make moral statements we're synthesising our underlying emotions and other knowledge into general descriptions of human behaviour and its relation to nature. And once we realise that, it's better to give up the simplifying framework so we can utilise empirical methods and fit it together in a single framework with our non-moral knowledge, where especially knowledge of evolutionary theory is helpful. This does require a different approach to communication and reflection. We are no longer passing along commands or court-like laws when we communicate on these issues. Instead, we are sharing information about other people's behaviour and about nature, just as we would any other factual description. The important thing to realise is that to recast moral statements we need to unpack them into two parts: a set of underlying emotions and factual knowledge, and an *interpretation* of those into a moral framework. We need to preserve the former while replacing the latter.

*Please read my article [The Amoral Society](#), published on [Phil Papers](#) on 25 October 2016, for a more detailed examination of these issues. As evidence, I examine areas where morality breaks down and where a functional framework based on evolutionary theory does not. I must warn, though, that I cover controversial issues.*