

## MORAL JUDGMENTS, MORAL VIRTUES, AND MORAL NORMS<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The paper consists of two basic parts. In the first, contemporary approaches to moral judgments and their relations with moral virtues and moral norms are analyzed. The focus is on comparing the role of the emotions and reason, and conscious and unconscious processes in forming and/or justifying moral judgments. The second part examines views on the current broader socio-political situation in Western countries and points to the growing feelings of insecurity among people mainly due to the fact that traditional ways of life have been losing solid ground, settled (social) norms and ethical systems are weakening and at the same time the social trust in various state institutions and bureaucratic structures involved in power is decreasing. In conclusion the author argues for the potential of the ethic of autonomy that would lead to still greater cooperation in globalized ethic, primarily thanks to our moral emotions and moral judgments.

**Keywords:** emotions, moral judgments, moral intuitions, moral virtues, moral norms, ethical systems.

### Introduction

Contemporary scientific discussions on morality and moral judgments indicate a rapid movement away from the exclusive field of philosophy toward more multidisciplinary approaches including psychology, sociology, economics, biology and neuroscience. Through these disciplines, great emphasis is placed especially on cognitive and evolutionary perspectives. The introduction of new concepts, notions, methods and techniques (including brain imaging) has enabled us to challenge, reformulate and empirically elaborate many traditional views more precisely. Another line of research has focused on attempts to explore the various consequences of moral judgments in real life situations (such as in pedagogical or political processes, etc.) in relation to authority and power. Here the focus is on the potential of relevant social structures to misuse their status by setting particular rules and norms in agreement with their own beliefs, and forcing others to behave according to them.

There is still a big gap between the rich and fascinating new empirical findings on moral decisions and judgments and the search for broader ethical systems that will be beneficial to the vast majority of people in an increasingly globalized world. It is mainly due to attempts to avoid conflating descriptive and prescriptive approaches or descriptive characterizations and prescriptive recommendations. However, the ultimate goal should be not “only” to

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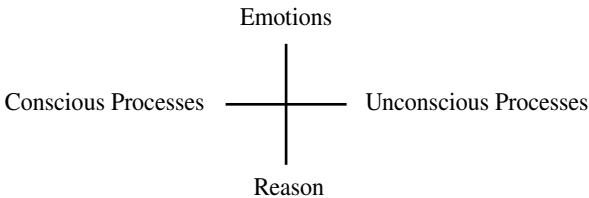
explain the processes that take part at the level of moral judgments per se, but to contribute as much as possible to solving the real social problems. The ideal aim would be to decrease the number of conflicts at inter-individual, group, and social levels and to provide answers to the question of how to decide between different or even opposing moral beliefs and judgments concerning particular rules, norms and actions.

The purpose of the paper is to give an overview of current multidisciplinary approaches to relations between moral judgments, moral virtues, and moral norms as well as to propose a preliminary model on these relations. Moreover, the paper outlines the broader socio-political situation in Western countries and argues for an ethic of autonomy as the core ethical system engendering cooperation thanks to our moral emotions and moral judgments.

**Moral Intuitions and Moral Judgments**

There has been a long-lasting debate about the notion, function and character of moral intuition and moral judgment that has shed no clear and unambiguous answers up to now. At the heart of the polemics and discussions lie the problems concerning the relationship between (1) the role of emotions and reason and (2) conscious and unconscious processes in forming and/or justifying moral judgments. Proponents of different assumptions on the topic can be divided along two bipolar orthogonal scales (see Figure 1); one representing the role of emotions and reason<sup>2</sup>, the second reflecting the conscious and unconscious processes that occur before or after moral judgment is formed. It might seem strange to separate the processes in this rather mechanistic way. However, we can identify fairly big differences in notions of their function. The *rationalist* paradigm stresses explicit moral reasoning as a condition of moral judgment, whereas the *sentimentalist* paradigm emphasizes that reasoning is the subsequent rationalization of moral judgment. The context of the situation in which judgment takes place, particularly the amount of time available to generate it and the nature of the moral action we are judging, mainly whether it is more or less harmful and personal, also seem to be important in triggering emotional or reasoning responses.

The lower left quadrant represents the view that moral judgments are based mainly on *conscious reasoning*. The classical assumptions made by Piaget and Kohlberg about



**Figure 1:** Schematic Structure of Mutual Relationships between Emotions and Reason and Conscious and Unconscious Processes Involved in a Moral Judgment

<sup>2</sup> It might seem better to consider whether and in what cases emotions are more or less active than reasoning.

gradual growth in a child's ability to make moral judgments on the basis of conscious reasoning about moral principles belong here. Currently there is quite broad agreement that as far as consequentialist thinking is concerned, with enough time to weight the causes and effects of various possible actions, forming a moral judgment in this way takes place within intra-individual, inter-individual, or group deliberation. Considerations of whether a flat rate tax or progressive rate tax is fairer and from what perspective may serve as a good example.

An influential contemporary scholar who stresses the importance of the justification of moral belief is Sinnott-Armstrong (2008). Though he does not support consequentialism, he draws attention to the *unreliability of moral intuitions* and so to the necessity of defending them. He does not focus so much on the way moral beliefs are formed, but instead, on how they can be justified. From this point of view Sinnott-Armstrong characterizes a moral intuition as "a strong immediate moral belief" as to whether "something is morally right or wrong, good or bad, virtuous or vicious," (*ibid.*, 47) by which he means that this belief is hard to challenge, and that it is formed independently of any process of inferring from other beliefs, i.e. those occurring before, during or after the emergence of the intuition. However, he argues against the assumption of moral intuitivism according to which moral intuitions can be justified noninferentially. His argumentation is based on experiments in which moral intuitions were shown to be subject to a framing effect occurring at the levels of language, context, and order. This means that using different words to describe the same situation or referring to a different context of the same situation may influence the reliability of our judgments<sup>3</sup>. Given that although the wording and context of the believer should not affect what is morally good or bad in description of the same morally loaded situation, but they do in fact do so significantly in many circumstances, he concludes that moral intuitions can be justified only inferentially—by inferring from other beliefs. So what Sinnott-Armstrong says is that we cannot believe our moral intuitions if we, in the subsequent phase, are not able to compare them with our other beliefs and somehow prove that they are in agreement or do not contradict one another. Only after this *conscious rational verification* may we consider our moral intuition as reliable. This is quite different, as we will see later, from moral intuitionist approaches where the post-hoc reasoning has the function of rationalizing moral intuitions rather than verifying their reliability.

The upper left quadrant represents occasions where we are *fully aware of our emotions* and where it is often very hard to relinquish ourselves from their power. For example, if somebody drives a car dangerously and at high speed and hits and kills our relatives, even months later when we recall this situation, we are still aware of our anger at the driver. This feeling is at the core of our very negative moral judgment against the driver although the intensity of the emotion is weaker than at the beginning. This quadrant does not attract as much attention since, once something important and serious exists at the conscious level, it will also undergo by rational scrutiny sooner or later.

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<sup>3</sup> I am not going to discuss the experiments to which he is referring, but will give a much condensed example—from Kahneman and Tversky—that illustrates this: the solution that will *save* 200 hundred people out of 600 seems to be more appropriate for people than the solution that would *let* 400 people *die* out of 600, although both are the same.

More tantalizing is the right-hand side of Figure 1, as there are many disputes as to the kinds of underlying *unconscious processes* that give rise to moral judgments. In recent years, assumptions have grown stronger about the very significant or crucial role of moral intuitions as basic building blocks for moral judgments. A significant number of approaches emphasize that in many situations where time is short there is neither the possibility nor the capacity to exhaustively analyze all (or at least many) of the possible consequences of each decision and the action based upon it. Instead, *fast moral intuitions* give us a clue as to how to evaluate the action we are going to judge.

On the lower right quadrant, which stresses the *unconscious* and inferential role of the *reason*, we can place scholars such as Gigerenzer (2008) and Hauser et al. (2008), though they differ in their approaches. Gigerenzer (2008) believes that moral intuitions can be explained by a *fast and frugal heuristic*. Thus we can morally decide or act within a very limited time and on the basis of very little information. Gigerenzer argues that since heuristics exploit both evolved abilities as well as environmental structures, they are embedded in (social) environments and are context sensitive. Therefore, “the rationality of a heuristic is not logical, but ecological—it is conditional on environmental structure” (*ibid.*, 4). He hypothesises that moral intuitions are based on reasons: people are mostly unaware of their underlying motives and reasons, albeit heuristics can easily be made conscious. However, he states that the unconscious’s reasons need not be the same as the post hoc ones. He challenges consequentialism on maximization or optimization of utility of (moral) actions, since in uncertain, ill-defined situations it is not possible to take into account and evaluate all the consequences of the possible decisions exhaustively. He stresses that especially in the moral domain the criterion for evaluating utility, happiness or pleasure is hard to define, because these concepts are very fuzzy, not to mention the multiple criteria that are hardly ever simultaneously optimized. Gigerenzer gives an example of the well-known problem of egalitarianism, where there has long been an ongoing debate over whether opportunities, rights, income, welfare, and capabilities should be equal.

However, this approach does not provide examples of specific moral heuristics. Instead, what he presents are general (social) heuristics like “don’t break ranks” or “do nothing about it” which can, in connection to different situations, bring either positive or negative outcomes. The point is that he assumes that there are no specific moral heuristics, and so the same heuristics can be applied in moral as well as non-moral domains. He also claims that heuristics operate according to different laws or norms and therefore lead to different outcomes. As an example, Gigerenzer refers to the lower numbers of organ donors in the countries where people must give explicit consent in comparison with the countries where people must actively opt out if they do not agree to become donors. For him people in countries with different rules for donors may use the same heuristic—do nothing about it—and interpret the existing law as a recommendation. This nicely illustrates how important it is to establish the conditions for living in a society. At least implicitly, it challenges the concerns about applying descriptive knowledge of moral judgments to prescriptive recommendations. However, Gigerenzer offers no answer as to how the external conditions should be set up, e.g. by means of rules and norms, nor does he suggest which of them may best serve a society. If, in many situations, humans really have a tendency to make decisions based on a very limited amount of information, how can we utilize it in a positive way? How

can we set the particular characteristics of the social environment so that our unconscious heuristic rules will profit from it? Another question is whether we should not hypothesize about a distinctive set of moral heuristics that would function in the moral domain. It is possible to imagine candidates or examples of heuristics, such as those based on the well-known evolutionary mechanisms of altruism: kin selection—“preferentially help your relatives even without reciprocity”, reciprocal altruism—“return dis/favour” (tit for tat), reputation—“stick to your commitments”, the handicap principle—“signalize your virtues in a costly way”.

Hauser (2006) and Hauser et al. (2008) suggest a quite different approach concerning our *moral instinct*, which enables us to generate quick moral judgments about what is morally good or wrong. They suggest that there is an analogy to be drawn between the grammar of language and grammar of morality. Since the language faculty has a set of unconscious principles and culturally tuned parameters that enable people to form grammatically correct sentences in their native language, similar mechanisms can be applied to moral faculty. In this line of argument moral intuitions are generated unconsciously on the basis of an *appraisal mechanism* that provides an *analysis of the causes and the consequences* of the agent’s (intentional) action. This process allows for the formation of judgments of “morally forbidden, permissible, or obligatory actions, with emotions and reasoning following” (Hauser et al. 2008, 117). They hypothesize that our moral faculty is equipped with a universal set of principles, with each culture setting up particular exceptions by tweaking the relevant parameters. As an example they show that killing is basically forbidden in all cultures; however, in different cultures different exceptions can be observed that enable its members to judge that the act is justified, permitted, or even obligatory (e.g. to eradicate family shame). The notion of a moral grammar is certainly very thought-provoking even though it cannot provide us with no direct or explicit clue as to how to set or adjust the parameters in a way that the majority will profit from it in everyday real life. That is one of the crucial differences between this and the next quadrant where, as we shall see, the emotions themselves directly signal whether some action or inaction is positive or negative.

The upper right quadrant protects the crucial role of the unconscious processes that are connected with the emotions and that prompt sudden feelings without there being any awareness of a reason for believing something to be right or wrong. Triggered emotions function as an appraisal mechanism that results in “like” or “dislike” moral intuitions. The primacy of emotionally based moral intuitions in generating moral judgments is advocated by various approaches. Let us start with the conception of Nichols (2008) which may at first sight look less unambiguous, but in the end he acknowledges that emotions determine our ability to differentiate moral transgressions from conventional ones as well as ensure the greater stability of moral norms over other types. According to him, emotions are crucial to our moral judgment; however, they are only one part of it since internally represented rules also contribute to generating moral judgment independently of them. In defending this view he uses the following arguments. We are able to judge that something is wrong even if we have lost all feelings about it and we can also make rational transitions from general principles to specific judgments and therefore reasoning seems to be a very important part of moral judgment. His approach stresses *two essential mechanisms* of moral judgment: “a body

of information prohibiting harmful actions and an affective mechanism that is activated by suffering in others” (*ibid.*, 263). He proposes an *affect-backed theory* where the crucial role of emotions lies in treating moral norms differently when compared to conventional norms. This means that we are more sensitive and attuned to moral transgression concerning fairness or causing harm to victims. At the same time we can reason about the moral rules on the basis of internalized rules. Nichols also points to the well-known correspondence between our feelings about what is harmful and the rules that proscribe actions leading to harmful events. However, against sentimentalist assumptions that consider norms as relevant emotions he postulates the “*affective resonance*” hypothesis. Its essence is that the role of emotions is to determine which norms will survive through our history and thus enhance cultural fitness. He states that some actions have the potential to excite negative emotions even in the absence of norms, and norms that prohibit these actions are more likely to survive; however, norms as such are independent of emotions. In his words “norms that prohibit actions to which we are predisposed to be emotionally averse will enjoy enhanced cultural fitness over other norms” (*ibid.*, 269). He shows that harm norms persisted throughout history in contrast to etiquette norms, which are much more unstable, and concludes that “norms that fit our emotions have a greater cultural resilience” (*ibid.*, 272).

Green (2008) also differentiates between two kinds of moral judgments people make: those that are deontological and driven by emotional intuitions and those that are consequentialist and based on reasoning. However, he ascribes greater significance to our tendency to be guided by our emotions and intuitions than by deliberation. He states that consequentialist judgments are made in relation to actions in which the emotional response is low while deontologist judgments are initialized when the emotional response is high. This idea is substantiated by experiments that measured and compared activity in the brain regions with the reaction times required to solve different kinds of moral dilemmas. He formulated the hypothesis—not entirely unambiguously empirically supported—that *up close and personal situations* and their moral violations trigger much higher emotional responses than other kinds of situations and dilemmas. Green advocates that this is also documented in real life situations and proffers the following examples. People are much more willing to financially assist a particular person or some identifiable people in danger because they experience higher levels of sympathy and pity for them than for unknown persons, even though the same amount of money could save the lives of far more people in the third world. Another example is that people punish or approve the punishment of specific wrongdoers predominantly for retributive, emotionally driven motives and feelings of anger rather than in order to prevent any future wrongdoing they may commit. In explaining why evolutionary adaptive moral behaviour should be driven by moral emotions and not by moral reasoning in such (harmful and personal) situations, Green says that emotions are reliable, quick and efficient, while reasoning is unreliable, slow and inefficient. According to Green, strong feelings tell us what must be done and what cannot be done, so deontology is just a kind of moral confabulation in terms of “a ‘cognitive’ expression of our deepest moral emotions” (*ibid.*, 63). Subsequently he argues that consequentialism is not emotionless but rather that the emotions do not function as an “alarm bell”, instead, in consequentialist judgments, systematic cognitive evaluation and the weighing up of all possible issues and their consequences plays a crucial role here.

Another advocate of the decisive role of emotions, not only in generating moral judgment, but also in determining *whether and how one will act* on a moral belief is Gazzaniga (2005). Using brain studies he confirms basic assumptions concerning the role of emotions in moral judgment. He assumes that people living in a community develop a social system that enables them to explain their feelings and institutionalize their feelings within a social structure. This view could also explain the emergence of norms. Gazzaniga assumes that people share the same moral networks and systems and so their response to the same issues is similar; however, they have different justifications for their (similar) behaviour. He argues that all societies believe that it is wrong to commit murder and incest, to abandon children, to break promises and to be disloyal to the family. Referring to brain imagining studies he adds that “when someone is willing to act on a moral belief, it is because the emotional part of his or her brain has become active when considering the moral question at hand. Similarly, when a morally equivalent problem is presented that he or she decides not to act on, it is because the emotional part of the brain does not become active” (*ibid.*, 167).

Damasio (2004) views emotions and feelings as a *regulation mechanism of organism homeostasis* capable of distinguishing and signalling actual problems or opportunities at the level of consciousness. Similar to Gazzaniga (2005) he assumes that we have a tendency to behave in a way that strengthens our positive emotions, and we label as good the events that correspond with them and weaken the negative ones, which we consider as bad.

The attraction of the theories founded on emotionally based moral intuitions lies partly in the fact that it is possible to measure activity in the corresponding brain regions when people are solving experimental tasks and dilemmas and/or are making moral judgments and partly in the fact that emotions themselves directly signal the need to approach or escape something positive or negative.

Haidt and Bjorklund (2008) offer one of the most elaborated approaches towards moral judgment and moral intuitions in the *social intuitionist model*. They define moral intuition “as the sudden appearance in consciousness, or at the fringe of consciousness, of an evaluative feeling (like-dislike, good-bad) about the character or actions of a person, without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of search, weighting evidence, or inferring a conclusion” (*ibid.*, 188). In most cases this feeling subsequently leads to the conscious positive or negative assessment of an agent. According to them this assessment of somebody together with the belief about the rightness or wrongness of the act s/he performed is a moral judgment and only subsequently does the conscious moral reasoning based on considering various arguments take place. However, they define (a post hoc) moral reasoning “as conscious mental activity that consists of transforming given information about people in order to reach a moral judgment” (*ibid.*, 189). So there is tension between these two claims as to whether moral judgment is formed automatically or after a moral reasoning and it would be more reasonable to assume that moral judgment based on moral intuition can be later transformed by moral reasoning. What is very important in this social intuitionist model is the emphasis on the social component (of intuition). The authors underline two different mechanisms concerning how these social processes are able to work. One is through *reasoned* persuasions while the second is through *social* persuasions. The aim of the reasoned persuasion is to reach consensus and mutual understanding of what is good or bad, right or wrong, appropriate or not appropriate and recast it into shared and favoured norms

and thus obtain the benefit of mutual trust and cooperation. Therefore, from an *evolutionary perspective* they see moral discourse as serving an adaptive biological function, increasing the fitness of those who stick to settled negotiated principles. Social persuasion is an entirely different process where people's moral judgments are formed on what other people in the vicinity or group believe in, even when they do not justify it; so according to them it is an automatic unconscious influence process. The mechanism or process of social persuasion resembles the heuristic rules of the kind "do what the majority does", or "believe what the majority believes". Both kinds of persuasions, reasoned and social, serve to support the authors in their argumentation that "moral judgment should be studied as a social process and in a social context moral reasoning matters" (*ibid.*, 193).

However, the authors are very explicit in warning us not to confuse the importance of social influence on moral judgment with an empiricist approach. They offer two basic arguments against empiricism. Firstly, children react differently to various kinds of socializations. For example, it is widely accepted that it is very easy and natural to acquire feelings of disgust for the abuse of a helpless innocent child; however it is rarely, if ever, possible to learn to hate justice. Equally, it is easier to teach children to fear snakes than flowers. The authors give another quite realistic (anti-utopian) example, where even if an unusual group of people somehow starts to believe in universal love for everybody, those people are not able to persuade their own children of their belief. Secondly, they consider a small set of moral intuitions to be easily detected in all societies. These are connected with harm/care (sensitivity to the harm and suffering of others), fairness/reciprocity (responsiveness to someone not repaying favours) and authority/respect (receptiveness toward a lack of deference). Two additional widespread sets of intuitions are related to purity/sanctity (issues of food, sex) and in-group/out-group (issues of loyalty and patriotism). These five domains of moral behaviour and the intuitions connected with them form, according to the authors, the foundations of intuitive ethics and constrain social constructions of virtues. In other words, they guide people in acquiring those kinds of virtues which are not in opposition to the five domains of intuitive ethic. The authors notice that it is the order of the importance of different virtues based on the basic moral intuitions that make the differences between cultures. This is a very crucial issue, as the order of importance of the virtues also influences the choice between bigger ethical systems, which will be discussed later.

From the overview of some of the most influential contemporary approaches, it is obvious that debates and notions about generating and justifying moral judgments are still attracting attention and have yet to be completely resolved. It must be stressed that moral intuitions may have two different functions: (1) To guide people on how to behave in some situations, especially when there is a lack of time for decision making, as in the case of Gigerenzer's heuristics. (2) To serve as a key element in generating moral judgments as the assessment of somebody (including ourselves) and the act s/he performed. In what is to follow, we will consider mainly the latter role of moral intuitions.

In the contemporary approaches outlined above nobody is questioning the role of moral intuitions in generating moral judgments. The differences lie in assumptions as to whether they are based on unconscious reasoning (heuristics, the appraisal mechanism analyzing causes and consequences of action) or unconscious processes triggering emotions. What seems to be evident is that intuitive mechanisms were selected during the evolutionary

process. Our ability to use the automatic processes of moral intuitions evolved to increase our likelihood of survival in situations where time is limited even if intuitions need not always be reliable. At the same time, on the basis of moral intuitions we can quickly generate moral judgments and once they are formed, they may be further rationalized, justified, challenged or transformed on the basis of deliberation.

Different assumptions concerning moral judgments can be summarized into two main categories. One category assumes that either emotions or reason or both are involved in generating any moral judgment while the second one holds that there are at least two basic kinds of moral judgments, one based primarily on emotions and the second founded primarily on reason. In an effort to find the smallest common denominator of the majority of the above-mentioned approaches and at the same time to achieve a highly presumable outcome, we should say the following. At least one set of moral intuitions is based on emotions signaling what is forbidden or required in situations where we can directly influence and prevent serious harm to other particular people or ourselves, especially when some kind of action must be carried out or avoided immediately. This set of moral intuitions is probably the most universal, lying at the heart of morality and serving as an inevitable basic condition for mutual respect and cooperation. Moreover, emotions signalling harm seem to be more easily expressed in rules guiding our behaviour in the most critical situations with a relatively few exceptions. At the same time, these moral intuitions are related to the ethic of autonomy as they are triggered in serious violation of basic human rights—the right to life, dignity, freedom, etc.

It is quite reasonable to assume that emotions, a phylogenetic mechanism older than reasoning, would to a large extent influence our adaptive moral behaviour and moral intuitions based on them will increase the chance of our survival. Green (2008) supports this claim with a nice analogy: Nature does not leave it up to our reason to discover the usefulness of sugar and proteins in our lives but instead provides us with feelings of hunger and intuitions that fruit and meat will satisfy us. Equally Nature does not leave it up to our deliberation as to whether we should save a drowning child but instead makes us feel guilty if we do not help immediately. At the same time, the advantage of approaches that track emotions lies in their potential not only to describe, but to prescribe and proscribe the kinds of behaviour we feel as pleasant or unpleasant.

Therefore the attractiveness of the social intuitionist model rests not merely on its introducing five moral intuitions as the basic building blocks on which morality can be shaped and cultivated but especially on its *bridging with theories of moral virtues*. As Haidt and Joseph (2007) illustrate, a vocabulary that describes the emotions, as well as the virtues and vices leading to desired or undesired behavioural outcomes can be built around each of the five basic domains of moral behaviour and the intuitions related to them. These virtues can be conveyed from one generation to another and, at the same time, they calibrate the basic building blocks to a particular cultural frame. The authors connect harm/care with virtues like caring and kindness, fairness/reciprocity with honesty and trustworthiness, authority/respect with obedience and deference, purity/chastity with temperance and cleanliness and in-group/loyalty with patriotism and self-sacrifice. Vices are represented by opposite features or traits like cruelty, dishonesty, disobedience, lust, and cowardice. What is important to stress here is that, for the authors, virtues mean social skills, i.e. their inductive

mastering signalizes the ability to grasp the local socio-moral context, to be sensitive towards morally relevant information and to behave accordingly.

## **Social and Moral Norms**

The sociomoral context is to a large extent captured in social and moral rules and norms. Or, as Bicchieri (2006) puts it, norms are the embodiment of the values and collective desires of society. For Bicchieri, norms are embedded into scripts—stereotyped sequences of actions appropriate in a particular context. She considers norms as a class of default rules and advocates a heuristic approach in the sense that in many situations context-dependent (social) norms will automatically be activated without deliberation.

It can be said that norms reflect the ideas concerning virtues and vices in the sense that they promote behaviour based on virtues and try to prevent or prohibit behaviour driven by vices. Breaking norms by applying vices instead of expected virtues causes negative emotions and tension. According to Sripada and Stich (2006) norms provide “an invisible web of normative structure embracing virtually all aspects of social life” (*ibid.*, 280). They argue that since norms are present in every society, we probably have *innate psychological mechanisms* for their acquisition and implementation. They stress that norms are not wholly arbitrary but instead certain kinds of them can be seen in the vast majority of human societies. They include here moral norms concerning the prohibition of killing, assault and incest, promoting sharing, reciprocating, helping, egalitarianism and social equality, and the regulation of sexual behaviour. They also hypothesize that “people are disposed to comply with norms even when there is little prospect for instrumental gain, future reciprocation, or enhanced reputation, and when the chance of being detected for failing to comply with the norm is small” (*ibid.*, 285). And they echo anthropological and sociological findings that norms violations elicit *punitive emotions* and reactions in all societies.

This approach may be well connected to that of Haidt and Joseph (2007) and Haidt and Bjorklund (2008). The norms mentioned above can be derived from the five domains of moral behaviour and associated intuitions. Moreover, they fit quite well with the *three basic moral codes: community, autonomy, divinity*. And according to Rozin et al. (1999) the three moral codes are linked to three moral emotions: contempt, anger, and disgust, respectively; these emotions are triggered in many situations when the behaviours of others which are not in harmony with the ethics are being observed or judged. The ethic of autonomy involves domains of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity, the ethic of community involves domains of authority/respect and preservation of loyalty to the own community and the ethic of divinity involves purity.

## **Emotions and Moral Virtues**

A possible explanation as to why people tend to behave in congruence with norms is offered by Frank’s hypothesis on the *strategic role of emotions* (1990). He proposes that (specific) emotions have substantial influence on our keeping our previous commitments even if they later seem contrary to our self-interest. He aptly illustrates his model of commitment with the following example. A person, who does not like unfair trades/contacts

can reliably threaten not to agree/deal with them even if it may be in his/her narrow or immediate interest to accept them and this kind of virtuousness predestines that person to become an effective negotiator in cases where others know his/her qualities. Frank hypothesizes that the evolutionary advantage of various feelings of guilt, anger, shame and the like, rests in the fact that others can recognize the character of their personal traits and thus differentiate between deceivers and co-operators. Those with moral feelings are more attractive to others and so they have a greater chance of obtaining material benefits from social cooperation. In contrast to the assumptions made by Sripada and Stich (2006), Frank explains adherence to norms as enhancing one's reputation, although people are not always aware of this reason for their behaviour. Enhancing one's reputation might likewise be a side effect of trying to adhere to norms in order to avoid one's own negative emotions as well as the negative emotions of the observers when the norms are broken.

Another important reason for our tendency to abide by norms and virtues strongly relates to *conflict resolution approach*. We have to bear in mind, as Boehm (2002) accentuates, that a common ancestor of Homo and Pan, who lived five million years ago in territorially oriented communities, was the subject of status rivalry that caused conflicts and thus forced them to a deliberative resolution. Therefore Boehm assumes that "moral communities arose out of group efforts to reduce levels of internecine conflict, as well as to avoid undue competition, domination and victimization" (*ibid.*, 85). In other words, he considers deliberative and *pre-emptive* efforts to resolve conflicts to be distinctive features of human communities. From this point of view, we might say that norms in most situations require that people behave according to culturally approved virtues while sanctioning deviations from norms serve to prevent full-blown conflicts.

This course of reasoning is backed by Curry's (2008) *conflict-resolution theory* of moral virtues. For him cooperation in recurrent social problems may be promoted by settling or resolving conflicts. According to his theory "the virtues are adaptations for competing without coming to blows; they serve to avoid, forestall, or defuse more violent means of competing for scarce resources" (*ibid.*, 251). It is quite a strong statement, as virtues are more descriptions of wishful features of human behaviour that reflect to some extent relevant adaptations, than adaptations per se<sup>4</sup>. However, the idea of perceiving virtues as tools for preventing or moderating serious conflicts in highly competitive situations corresponds well with the fact that such situations trigger strong emotional reactions urging for the social construction of virtues and norms with the aim of avoiding socially and biologically unacceptable behavioural outcomes. Curry speaks of two basic kinds of character traits or virtues—pagan and Christian—which can be seen as moral in the sense of their potential to solve moral emotional tension. He means that pagan virtues like beauty, strength, courage magnanimity and leadership are "signals of superiority" with two aims: to attract mates and to deter rivals; while Christian virtues such as humility, meekness, quietude, asceticism, and obedience are "signals of submission" that bring conflict to an end. Put differently, these two kinds of virtues

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<sup>4</sup> Haidt and Bjorklund (2008) offer a more apt characterization of virtues as constrained social constructions, i.e. culturally ideal skills that are to some degree learned or acquired but at the same time are co-determined by our moral intuitions and emotions. Moreover, whether the same person will express virtue or vice depends often as well on the particular context of a situation.

are virtues of dominance and submissiveness which people alternatively use depending on the situation, its context, the quality of the attending rivals and admirers and the assessment of one's own abilities and strength/power. At the same time both kinds of virtues can be used in such a way that the whole group and not just the holder of them will benefit from them.

### **Relations between Moral Judgments, Moral Virtues and Moral Norms**

In formulating a hypothesis and searching for possible relations between moral judgments, virtues and norms, which are basically in accordance with the approaches outlined, the following hypothetical model can be proposed (see Figure 2). In seeing, hearing or recalling some kind of previous act in a morally loaded situation our emotions are triggered. They may be either positive or negative and either focused on others or on ourselves. Examples of positive emotions oriented towards others are love, gratitude, admiration (e.g. in case somebody does a courageous act that save the life of other people). Our positive emotions, like self-esteem or happiness emerge in circumstances where we personally perform an act to help or protect others from suffering. The same holds for negative emotions with the difference that they emerge in situations where we or another person committed an act that harmed or did not prevent the harm of another<sup>5</sup>. These emotions can be seen, in accord with Damasio (2004), as an appraisal mechanism signaling change from a steady or neutral state to an un/willing state. They signal whether the in/action of one agent has a positive or negative impact on another agent. They serve as a "like" or "dislike" moral intuition about the act with no conscious analyzing of the reasons. The intuition progressively leads us to generate broader moral judgments in which we rate the act (e.g. as right or wrong) as well as the agent of the act (e.g. as good or bad). Emotions that are essential for forming moral judgments have a motivational force to describe the characteristics or features of people that cause other people to like or dislike them in terms of virtues and vices. On the basis of socially co-constructed virtues and vices, like fearless-arrogant, obedient-fawning we can justify to ourselves or to others why we judge someone to be good or bad. Norms<sup>6</sup> that promote virtues and limit vices can then be built up consecutively. We can justify why we consider some acts to be right or wrong on the basis of whether they were obeyed or broken<sup>7</sup>. Emotions then also serve as guardians of norms, signaling whether people behave according to them. Different groups of norms can create broader ethical categories which may exist in contradiction. But it is not a condition. They may just stress the order of importance of various norms<sup>8</sup>.

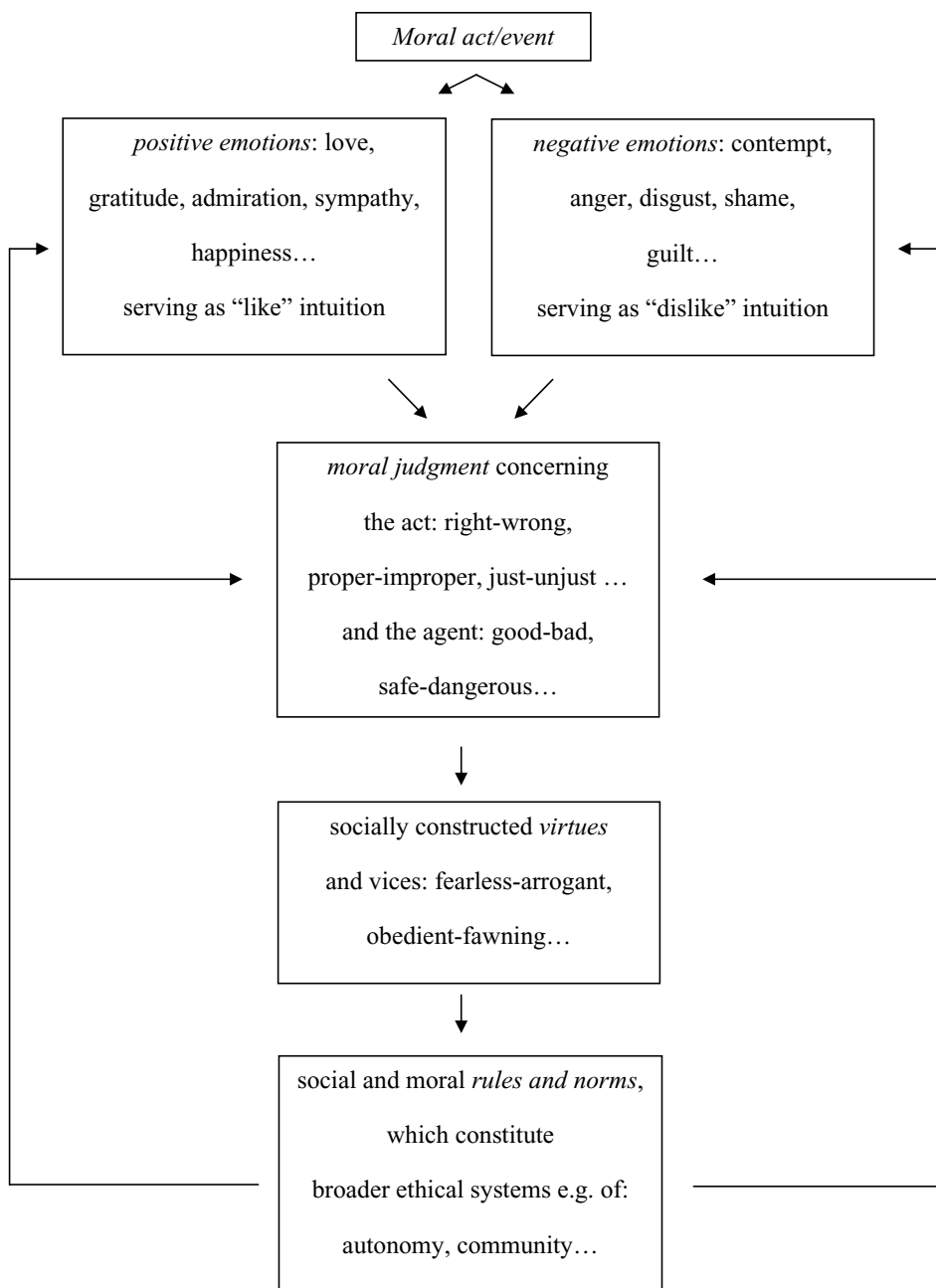
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<sup>5</sup> Rozin et al. (1999) differentiate two clusters of negative moral emotions: (1) other-critical CAD (contempt, anger, disgust) and (2) self-critical SEG (shame, embarrassment, guilt).

<sup>6</sup> In speaking about norms, we refer chiefly to social norms and consider moral norms to be a unique subclass of them.

<sup>7</sup> Our ability to justify our moral judgment by reference to virtues and norms does not mean that we always justify moral judgments. In many situations we do not care why we generated some kind of moral judgment. Where we make subsequent justifications this mainly results from conversations or disputes with others about particular kinds of behaviour in specific circumstances.

<sup>8</sup> Two basic ethical systems are more often discussed: the ethic of autonomy and the ethic of community. Whether someone agrees with a flat or progressive tax rate can serve as an example of different moral



**Figure 2:** Relations between Moral Judgments, Virtues and Norms

By deliberating with others (as well as with ourselves) on our different moral judgments and their rationalization we can strengthen or weaken our original emotions or intuitions in the short term. However, deliberation may also lead to us adding or changing arguments in our previous moral judgment. And deliberation may also contribute to an awareness that there is a need to reconstruct some of the norms, due for example to some novel situations like those caused by technological progress, or new ways of life that result from socio-political or economic changes. By taking into account and accepting different arguments we may in the long term influence our emotional reactions in such a way that a similar moral act causes a different moral intuition to appear than before. So social norms, which are not absolutely fixed and static categories, provide a feedback link to the system that triggers moral intuitions and judgments. Therefore norms have dual characteristics. On the one hand they were generated on the basis of emotional experiences and reasoning about some kinds of acts relating to morality and on the other hand they co-create or fine tune the emotional and reasoning processes.

### Functions of Norms from Broader Perspective

So far, we have focused on *descriptive* issues of moral judgments and their relations with virtues and norms, underscoring the positive aspect of norms as a means of ensuring cooperation. However, there are influential post-modern views that challenge the idea that norms have the same positive function for different groups of people. The basic argument is that (at least in Western cultures) norms serve mainly the middle class and those who create, support and enforce them do not take sufficiently into account the poor conditions of various underprivileged groups in the population, namely from the point of view of work opportunities, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Therefore Schwartz et al. (2009), for example, maintain that a democratic society should be self-critical and sensible to *counter-normative* thinking, where the citizens are willing to freely express disagreement with the status quo of society and are ready for social protests and disobedience.

Although such critiques are warranted to a large extent, they may create another extreme by one-sidedly rejecting the function of norms, as their positive side and usefulness can hardly be doubted. However, an awareness of how norms can be misused can also be found in the evolutionary camp. For instance, Dennett (2003) notes that the evolutionarily developed ability to distinguish selfish behaviour from cooperative behaviour not only creates the substrate to the social or cultural evolution of local norms, but also pressures the community into punishing deviants. In his own words “a group’s evolution of the capacity for policing its members, by adopting the disposition among its members to punish violators (of whatever its other policies are), opens the floodgates to the *social* or *cultural* evolution of all manner

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judgments concerning justice (without taking into account the real legal situation concerning taxes). At first glance it seems obvious that people who prefer the ethic of autonomy will defend the flat rate while those that favour the ethic of community will advocate the progressive rate. However, proponents of the ethic of autonomy may also strongly support the very needy underprivileged by directly sponsoring various foundations with the aim of improving the material resources or (educational) skills of the underprivileged if they consider their living situation to be unjust.

of local norms” (*ibid.*, 200-201). And such policing not only enforces group conformism but create the conditions and potential for the misuse of power. This mechanism enables those in dominant, influential and powerful positions to create joint coalitions and establish systems of norms that privilege them over other members of society<sup>9</sup>. From this point of view norms can serve to create and preserve inequalities (e.g. racial, ethnical, gender) in access to both material and immaterial resources.

Western societies have been greatly changed by the process of globalization, the more flexible and less secure job market, progressive technical innovations, and challenges to the power of science to bring solutions for the severest problems people have relating to a lack of basic resources, poverty and the relativization of truth. Over the last few decades traditional ways of life have been losing ground, settled (social) norms and ethical systems are weakening and, at the same time, trust in various state institutions and bureaucratic power structures power is decreasing. It seems more or less obvious that there was contentedness with traditional ethics, where norms concerning ethical, moral and socially desirable behaviour were supported by large religious, political, business and family systems of beliefs that related to proper, suitable and optimum ways of life. These were mainly based on diligence, modesty, self-sacrifice, thriftiness, respect for and obedience to authorities as well as taking responsibility for one’s professional and family life (for more details see Fukuyama 2006 for instance). All those changes took place in the background of the critique of Enlightenment rationality as a pillar of the preceding universal morality. According to this rationality emotions were understood as an obstacle to reasoning about ethics, since moral beliefs based on emotions were not supported by empirical arguments (Giddens 1993). Moreover, quite extensive mobility and the related influx of migrants from the third world to Western countries led to a growing mixture of cultures with different value systems projected onto various and not always compatible normative frames.

The German constitution federal judge Udo di Fabio (2009) explains the negative aspects of the almost unconditional acceptance of arbitrary ways of life which gradually led to the diminishing of social norms. He points out that while political power enforces particular behaviours through the laws, societies have increasingly larger barriers preventing the application of simple social norms to everyday life and they are even ashamed to demand their application beyond the boundaries of law. He considers the quiet tolerance characterized by the attitude “not to hit” to be the main contemporary anti-Enlightenment norm. He warns of its negative consequences lying in attenuation/the decline of the tradition of wisdom in life and coexistence while civic standards of behaviour regulation are being pushed out and are losing their value coordinates. Similarly Plummer (2003) points to the negative implications of *moral relativism*, which may generate moral indifference and apathy towards everything outside the borders of the local context.

As Beck (1992) states, in these *detraditionalized modes of living*, the social crisis seems to be of an individual origin. At the same time, “the detraditionalized individuals become dependent on the labour market, and with that, dependent on education, consumption, regulations, and support from social laws, traffic planning, product offers, possibilities

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<sup>9</sup> For more details, see e.g. Ullmann-Margalit (1997).

and fashions in medical, psychological and pedagogical counselling and care” (*ibid.*, 90). A newly gained freedom seems to be a freedom with many different and often contradictory obligations without an “instruction manual” as to how to fulfil them. As Heaphy (2007) adds, individualization means that people are pressured “to construct a do-it-yourself biography that incorporates and becomes the focus of various—often contradictory—demands, rights and responsibilities” (*ibid.*, 87). This situation again points to the importance of social and moral norms as a guide for our (proper and justifiable) behaviour, as well as a frame or background against which we can demarcate/delineate ourselves. However, as Bauman (2006) stresses, the solid and stable orientation points of the organization of a society that were more permanent than the timespan of an individual’s life have disappeared.

The whole structural social context puts pressure on individuals to find their way around and make decisions on their own in a web of various, sometimes fuzzy, sometimes contradictory demands, rules and responsibilities; at the same time, however, it leads to feelings of danger with increasing uncertainty and risk the result of the possible consequences of taking the wrong choice of action. Paradoxically enough, the seemingly high level of individual freedom necessitates security and a search for “instructions on how to survive” within a wider community and greater social institutionalized aggregates which, however, are increasingly atomized and do not provide consistent suggestions backed by ethical system(s), but mutually contradictory expectations. Therefore the question arises as to whether the present day freedom is not rather more institutionalized than individual freedom and whether the contemporary self is not an almost wholly institutionalized self.

### **An Open Conclusion, or What Kind of Ethic Would We Need?**

The first part of the paper was devoted to outlining an overview of current multidisciplinary approaches towards relations between moral judgments, moral virtues, and moral norms. We came to the conclusion that at least one set of moral intuitions is based on emotions signaling what is forbidden or required in situations where a person can directly influence and prevent serious harm to another particular person, especially when some kind of action must be taken or avoided immediately. It was proposed that this set of moral intuitions is probably the most universal lying at the heart of morality and serving as an inevitable basic condition for mutual respect and cooperation. At the same time, these moral intuitions are related to the ethic of autonomy as they are triggered in serious violations of basic human rights—the right to life, dignity, freedom, etc.

In the next part the broader socio-political situation in Western countries was outlined. It showed that with the weakening and diminishing of the social norms and ethical systems and the increasing number of institutions with different, if not contradictory, demands and expectations, many people feel ever more insecure because of the possible negative consequences of making the wrong choice.

Lastly, we wanted to touch upon two basic kinds of ethical systems, the ethic of autonomy and the ethic of community. As mentioned above, in the radically changed social conditions people are balancing between individualism, autonomy, responsibility for themselves on the one side, and, collectivism, life in a community, in mutual relationships and commitments to others, on the other side. This is reflected in a contradiction between

freedom and independence versus security and a sense of belonging in different forms. Since communities bring a sort of loss of freedom and, on the other hand, life outside the community brings about the loss of safety, it can be expected, in accord with Bauman (2006), that the dilemma between freedom and security will be solved again and again while at the same time the solution can never satisfy the different spheres of life sufficiently. However, the ethical systems need not stand in sharp contrast to one another; quite the opposite, they should be expanded to such an extent as, for instance, to form a subset of the community of the autonomous ethics and vice versa. The impassable, sharp and unchanging boundaries between them have to be replaced by barriers that slide both ways so that the autonomous decision making would also take into account the needs of other members of community, and the rules of the community would provide enough space for individuals.

Nevertheless, the question still remains as to whether one kind of ethic is not to be found more at the core than the other ones. More specifically, whether it is not warranted that we assume that the ethic of autonomy is a fundamental kind of ethic. There are several reasons for this assumption. Firstly, there is a lot of historical evidence that the rules and norms of behaviour enforced from above can serve only those in power and create inequalities. And individual freedom, as well as freedom of will, cannot be determined by the state and political institutions in power because it is simply an oxymoron where authenticity is lost<sup>10</sup>. Secondly, although many social engineers have the best intentions as to how to improve the life conditions of societies, they often do not take into account the nature of human beings. Examples include having different relationships with someone close (relative, friend, member of small community) and with other unknown people, or having different attitudes toward private and common property. Thirdly, we have a natural tendency to preserve our life and to prefer having positive emotions over negative ones. Therefore the majority of people mostly tend to behave in such a way that when they or others judge their behaviour, the positive emotions will prevail over the negative. This enables them to construct and adhere to virtues and norms that lead to positive outcomes. Therefore it is obvious that the ethic of autonomy cannot be based on egoistic behaviour at the individual level but rather on cooperation with others, in expressing an interest in the circumstances of their life conditions and in building positive relations with them. Even if the ethic of autonomy springs from the pursuit of our own needs, at the same time our minds have the ability to put us in the shoes of others thanks to the mechanism of empathy. That is another reason why our evolved moral faculty gives us the potential to transcend our myopic egoism, to be aware of, and emotionally experience the positive aspects of collaboration and of the strength of this kind of behaviour, where our will and our inner moral beliefs are in harmony with benevolence and kindness. Of course, an uncritical one-sided generosity that does not take into account how other people react to this kind of behaviour can be exploited and abused by others and therefore mutual control and our moral judgments are and will remain important for a cooperative way of life.

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<sup>10</sup> Even if the self is socially co-constructed and dynamically changing throughout our lives that does not mean that it is solely socially determined.

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