

**TOWARD A THREE-DIMENSIONAL MODEL OF THE  
MORAL DOMAIN**

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The idea that morality is scalar has been initially expressed by Michael Slote and Bjorn Eriksson, but it was more systematically defended recently by Catherine Wilson. Wilson suggests defining morality as a system of advantage-reducing imperatives, and this is the view that will be assumed in what follows. Unlike Hobbes, who starts with the premise of the universal *equality* of all humans, Wilson starts with the assumption of fundamental *inequality* of the members of a social group. It is because people are unequal in several important respects (e.g., strength, intellectual power) that we need moral regulation to begin with. More specifically, Wilson sees the primary function of morality as controlling and inhibiting the spontaneous aggressive impulses which otherwise give advantage to the naturally stronger or smarter members of the social group. The strategic goal of moral restrictions is to counterbalance natural inequalities in such a way as to increase the range of possibilities for the weaker members.

The *amoral* world, in this view, is the world populated by ethical egoists, whose behavior can be described in terms of unrestricted pursuance of one's own interest. In this pre-moral world (the 'D' world on Wilson's classification<sup>1</sup>) one may harm or kill all competitors for health-enhancing resources, insofar as one is capable of doing so with impunity.

Morality, thus understood, may admit of degrees, ranging from the minimalistic moral policy of the ‘H’ world<sup>2</sup>, which barely differs in its behavioral manifestations from the amoral ‘D’ world, to the possible *hypermoral* community where one is required to give up his natural advantages or acquired resources to the extent it might be necessary for full realization of the egalitarian ideal on the universal scale.<sup>3</sup> The increment of morality, I suggest, may proceed along the following three dimensions: increasing the *scope*, *strictness* and *intensity* of moral rules. In her discussion of progression from the world wholly devoid of moral elements to the hypermoral world Wilson mainly emphasizes the intensity of moral regulation, but it seems that the other two dimensions are equally important, and should be treated separately.

We increase the *intensity* of moral regulation in so far as we move from the basic prohibition on causing ‘substantial’ physical harm to competitors to the more liberal requirement to abstain from causing any harm whatsoever, of both physical and non-physical variety, and, further, to the requirement of giving up one’s natural advantages to improve the lot of the less fortunate individuals (active assistance). We increase the *strictness* of a moral prohibition on causing harm by reducing the number of exceptions that the rule admits of. And we increase the *scope* of a moral rule or prohibition by including under its protection the ever widening groups of sentient creatures (the ‘target group’) – starting from the immediate family members to the abstract community of all sentient creatures, with the all possible intermediate points.

Since Wilson covers the comparison of the advantage-reducing behavioral policies along the intensity dimension quite well, I shall mainly concentrate on the other two aspects, which I propose as additions to her account.

Compare the following two meta-rules which are the two variations on Wilson's formula for her 'H' (minimally moral) world:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Act always to maintain or promote your own interests, except when you cause substantial harm to the members of your immediate family.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** Act always to maintain or promote your own interests, except when you cause substantial harm to the members of your tribe.

Both policies are recognizably moral if we accept the basic account of the purpose of morality as aiming at reducing the advantages of the stronger party. Both policies admit only minimal restrictions on aggressive behavior while pursuing the self-interested cause. But there is a difference between the two, which concerns the range of all possible recipients of the benefits of non-aggression. Moreover, we want to say that the **H<sub>3</sub>** policy is in important sense *more* moral, it represents a crucial improvement in the process of moral development, and that any further widening of the coverage of the protective rules (further **H<sub>n</sub>** policy) will result in corresponding increase in the moral features of that world.<sup>4</sup>

The slow ascent from the hypothetical amoral world to the world containing some moral regulations would in most cases involve upward movement along all three axes of the moral evaluative scale.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the moral deterioration on the individual or social level rarely happens along one of the dimensions of morality only. But certain artificially created conditions may trigger a peculiar type of amoralism, which conspicuously affects only one aspect of morality, without yet producing the corresponding decline elsewhere on the moral scale. Those examples are particularly instructive for our purposes as they allow focusing on that feature of moral regulation which interests us most at this point.

The weakening of moral regulation along the dimension of the *scope* of moral rules is probably the most familiar type as far as the ordinary experience is concerned. We may capture this condition by the term *selective amoralism*. A selective amoralist is a person who, without fully abandoning the moral point of view, limits the number of individuals whose natural or situational disadvantages should be compensated by the protective force of the moral rules. Such selective application of moral considerations may be either persistent or temporary.

The most conspicuous cases of this kind of amoral attitude have eerie historical reality to them. The following excerpt from the speech made by Heinrich Himmler to SS Group leaders in 1943 illustrates this especially well:

It is absolutely wrong to project our own harmless soul with its deep feelings, our kindheartedness, our idealism, upon alien peoples. [...] One principle must be absolute for the SS man: we must be honest, decent, loyal and friendly to members of our blood and to no one else. [...] Whether the other races live in comfort or perish of hunger interests me only in so far as we need them as slaves for our culture. We shall never be rough or heartless where it is not necessary; that is clear. We, Germans, who are the only people in the world who have a decent attitude to animals, will also adopt a decent attitude to these human animals (Bennett 127-8).

Kindheartedness, honesty and loyalty are all praiseworthy moral virtues. A claim is made, however, that the behavior sanctioned by these traits of character must be directed toward a selected group of people only. Moreover, it would be *wrong*, to exhibit kindness and loyalty to anyone else. The selective amoralist is a member of the wider category of amoralists, even though, he is not wholly devoid of morality in the way, for example, an inhabitant of the hypothetical ‘D’ world or a psychopath is. His amoralism, rather, is manifested either by persistent unwillingness to recognize a certain group of people as having all the rights of the

other moral agents or by limiting the extent of his moral duties to the time and place that are chosen arbitrarily.

Finally, the notion of the *strictness* of moral prohibitions refers to the number and the kind of exceptions that a person adopting the rule recognizes. Few ordinary moral blocking rules are absolute in the stronger Kantian sense – when one is obligated to abstain from an action no matter what the consequences are. Yet we may agree with Kant's intuition that the notion of morality is somehow connected with the categorical status of its pronouncements, without yet giving up the leading idea of the scalar nature of morality. The progressive increase of moral regulation is directly proportionate to the degree these regulations approximate the status of the categorical imperatives. Kantian moral imperatives are at the top of the moral scale, but that does not rule out the presence of moral elements in other, less restrictive and more flexible action-guiding policies. Moreover, the non-categorical advantage-reducing imperatives may be further arranged relatively to one another depending on their relative strictness.

Consider the following two meta-policies:

**S<sub>1</sub>:** Act always to maintain or promote your own interests, except when you cause substantial harm to others, unless causing substantial harm to others will result in *significant* improvement of your own condition.

**S<sub>2</sub>:** Act always to maintain or promote your own interests, except when you cause substantial harm to others, unless causing substantial harm to others will result in a *radical* improvement of your own condition.

These two meta-rules are intentionally formulated as to remain ambiguous with regard to their respective scope. The moral intensity of both policies remains unchanged from S<sub>1</sub> to S<sub>2</sub>. But unlike the intensity of morality which deals with 'substantiality' of harm to others tolerated

under the overarching policy of pursuing one's own interest, the strictness condition addresses the question of substantiality of the benefit one may reasonably expect to gain by causing a certain amount of harm to competitors. The italicized words above are meant to point to a difference in the amount or degree of the expected benefit, where, I take it, the *radical* improvement signifies a relatively greater achievement as compared to the merely *significant* one. Now I want to argue that  $S_2$  is clearly more restrictive than  $S_1$  in the sense that it allows fewer exceptions to the ‘no-substantial-harm-to-others’ rule, and thus should stand higher on the scale of morality.

This is reflected in our intuitive tendency to measure the ‘badness’ of a criminal depending on the purpose and the motivation behind the crime. A version of the ‘Heinz example’ may illustrate this quite well. A man who holds up a bank and shoots the clerk because he needs money for a life-saving drug is usually looked at differently as compared with a man who commits the same crime because he needs money for an iPod. Both actions are clearly motivated by self-interested, but the difference in the amount and kind of benefit expected from the crime seems to warrant a differential treatment when it comes to comparing their relative ‘wickedness’. We tend to think that a person who is willing to make an exception to the basic ‘no substantial harm’ rule even in view of a very insignificant benefit to himself is more deeply amoral as compared with the first person.

We can say that the two criminals in the two examples above differ with respect to their *infringement threshold*, i.e., the relative ease with which they are likely to infringe on the prohibitions to cause harm to others if this leads to the satisfaction of their interests. In general, the lower the infringement threshold is set, the greater is the degree of amorality.<sup>6</sup> The perfectly amoral community, such as Hobbes’ ‘state of nature’ with the unceasing war of all against all or

Wilson's 'D' world populated by extreme but consistent ethical egoists, has probably never existed in its pure form. But a community can approximate that amoral 'ideal' to a greater or lesser degree during some dramatic periods of its history. The startling case of moral degeneracy can be observed on the example of a behavioral pattern of a certain mountainous tribe in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Colin Turnbull's well-known account of the Ik people's moral deterioration in Northern Uganda is a case in point. Christopher Cherry gives a vivid summary of Turnbull's report on the present *amoral* condition of the Ik tribe:

A child dumped on the ground is seized and eaten by a leopard. The mother is delighted; for not only does she no longer have to carry the child about and feed it, but it follows that there is likely to be a gorged leopard nearby, a sleepy animal which can easily be killed and eaten. An old woman who has been abandoned falls down the mountainside because she is blind, so a crowd gathers to laugh at the spectacle of her distress. A man about to die of gunshot wounds makes the last request for tea. As he feebly raises it to his lips, it is snatched from him by his sister, who runs away delighted. A child develops intestinal obstruction; so his father calls in the neighbors to enjoy the joke of his distended belly (73).

Such drastic deterioration of all social ties and the breakdown of all previously honored norms and values was the result of forced changes in Ik's traditional way of life. Prior to these geographical and ecological changes, the customary morality of the tribe was no different and no less scrupulously observed than that of the related communities.

What interests us in this example is the dramatic lowering of the infringement threshold among the members of this community. The previously existing prohibitions on harming (at least) the members of one's own family have given way to the narrowly conceived self-interested considerations to the extent that leaves us with few cues for recognizing it as a *human* community at all. It is a society where the blocking rules of morality have weakened greatly, and

now even the cruellest action towards the members of the same family is permitted as long as it satisfies some immediate interest of the agent. The most shocking feature here is the triviality and insignificance of the expected personal gain (e.g., not having to carry a baby, having a good meal or having a good laugh) that prompts the aggressive behavior or blameworthy indifference.

I wanted to stress in this paper that the attempts at defining the amoralist as an individual who fails to recognize the validity and overriding importance of moral requirements suffer from vagueness which is hard to eliminate without first specifying the constitutive features of morality itself. If we accept the idea of the scalar nature of morality and spell it out in terms of the three basic dimensions along which we may increase or decrease the intensity, scope and strictness of moral regulation, the concepts of *amoralism* and *amoralists* become more concrete as well.

The view sketched above has implications for the applied aspects of social ethics as well. A psychopath often figures as a paradigm example of an extreme amoralist,<sup>7</sup> and his abnormal condition presents the philosophers who study this type with a series of puzzles. The most familiar one deals with the appropriateness of regarding the psychopaths as morally responsible for their actions, given their apparent unresponsiveness to moral reasons and idiosyncratic conceptions of self interest. A number of researchers who want to exempt extreme amoralists from responsibility build their case on the assumption that psychopaths are *too* different from the rest of us to warrant the application of the familiar moral and legal categories. Jeffrie Murphy, for example, writes: “From the moral point of view, it is very implausible to regard [psychopaths] as *persons* at all... A psychopath is more profitably pictured as an *animal*” (293-4). Yet, if the picture presented above is plausible the extreme amoralist should not be seen as a different type of human agent to whom none of the ordinary evaluative categories apply<sup>8</sup>, but

rather as occupying a certain point on a continuous three-dimensional scale of morality, and whose condition is fully commensurable with that of the morally concerned agents.

The amoral condition is a matter of degree. One can be more or less indifferent to the ends of morality, and the strength of one's moral motive need not remain the same over time. There exists continuity between the 'normal' subjects and amoralists, including the most radical cases of psychopathy. Egocentrism is at the core of the amoral condition and the tendency to give priority to one's own interest at the expense of others is certainly not a rare trait in many ordinary individuals. But it would be odd to suppose that by increasing the scope and intensity of this attitude one would eventually pass over to a qualitatively different type of agent, where none of the normal standards of moral responsibility would be applicable. As a psychiatrist Richard Jenkins reminds us, "the psychopath is simply the extreme on the continuum. This means that the significant question will be one of degree rather than one of categorization, not, *is* he a psychopath, but rather *how* psychopathic is he?" (372). What has been long recognized in developmental psychology and psychiatric science should finally get theoretical justification in moral theory as well.

*Acknowledgements: I should like to thank Catherine Wilson and Danny Scoccia for reading and commenting upon the earlier version of this paper.*

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> “D: Act always to maintain or promote your own interests, e.g., by consuming all health-enhancing resources, harming competitors, and removing obstructions to your reproductive success” (Wilson 23).

<sup>2</sup> “H: Act always to maintain or promote your own interests, according to formula D, except when you cause substantial harm to others” (Wilson 23).

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Wilson’s ‘Q’ world: “Act always to maintain or promote your own interests, unless by your doing so another’s condition is rendered worse than it would be by your not so acting, or not improved” (27).

<sup>4</sup> Wilson observes (13) that many of the commandments of the New Testament represent the extreme points on the scale of *intensity* of moral rules (i.e., they prescribe non-resistance, complete renunciation of advantage, self-sacrifice). But likewise, the New Testament ethics can be seen as approaching the limit in increasing the *scope* of the moral rules as well. Cf. Christ’s parable of the Good Samaritan in response to the question “Who are my neighbors?” (Luke, Chapter 10).

<sup>5</sup> My model recognizes that each of the three variables on this three-dimensional moral scale may have different weight, and that the overall upward movement is not necessarily symmetrical along all three axes. Indeed, one might argue that as the moral code of a community becomes more demanding on the ‘scope’ dimension (i.e., it recognizes moral duties that go beyond the family, tribe or nation), it tends to become less demanding on the ‘intensity’ dimension. Moral codes of a very limited scope (e.g., one’s duties are limited to the clan) tend to be more intense (e.g., imposing a duty to help feed other clan members who cannot feed themselves). A more universal moral system, on the other hand, might only impose a duty not to harm others. (I am grateful to Danny Scoccia for suggesting to me this line of thought).

<sup>6</sup> The full analysis of the *scope* dimension would have to make a distinction between strictness as a property of ‘official’ moral *rules*, and strictness or laxness as a property of the *agent* who allows himself exceptions to the universal rule. If the ‘official’ policy allows for exceptions, then, of course, it makes no sense to speak of *infringements* of the rule. In the present context, when ‘rule’ is mentioned, it refers to some subjectively adopted maxim that accounts for a person’s choices, and which may be compared to an ‘idealized’ version of the rule which best fulfills the main function of morality.

<sup>7</sup> We can provisionally define an *extreme* amoralist as a person who scores very low on all three dimensions of the moral scale. To be sure, the definition is vague, but tolerably so for the present purposes. The label of *amoralist* is attached to a psychopath (or sociopath) by Norman Williams (*Introduction to Moral Education*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967, 272), Derek Wright (*The Psychology of Moral Behavior*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971, 208ff), and David Brink (“External Moral Motivation” *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 1986, 29). For the contrary opinion see Milo, 1984, 60-62.

<sup>8</sup> The incomplete list of philosophers and psychologists who argue for a view of radical discontinuity between psychopaths and the rest of human agents, denying the moral responsibility of psychopaths, would include Haksar, (1965); Murphy, (1972); Pritchard, (1974); Duff (1977); Arrington, (1979) and Deigh, (1995). For the opposite view see Frankfurt (1971); Flew, (1973); Smith, R. (1984); Glannon, (1997) and Zavaliy (2008).

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