



## The Importance of Moral Behaviours in the Anthropocene Epoch

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### Abstract

This article wishes to present a theoretical perspective which seeks to address the importance of moral behaviours in the current proposed epoch, characterized by the significant impact of human activity upon Earth's geology and ecosystems, called the Anthropocene. The present paper proposes that, in the current global context, time has come for humanity to implement new adaptive answers to the problems of mutualism, and therefore, argues in favour of the idea that wishing to discover and to behave in accordance with objective moral truths represent, on one hand, a first step in the process of ensuring a collective and benevolent development for mankind, and on the other hand, a major aspect which fulfills both self-actualization needs and self-transcendence needs. In line with this view, this article hopes to inspire future researcher investigations that would aim to find out new and more practical ways of increasing the frequency of moral behaviours.

**Keywords:** Moral behaviour; Moral development; Moral realism; Anthropocene

Why would we behave morally? Perhaps one of the most philosophical questions in the history of mankind. Going beyond many debates that have discussed this topic, the abovementioned question always referred to the only moment that we experience: the present. Therefore, why would one be moral now?

### The Anthropocene

Many geologists, ecologists and philosophers believe that we live in the epoch of the Anthropocene [1-3]. The Anthropocene represents a new epoch in the human history, characterized by the heightened importance of mankind in many aspects, as it brings with itself a probably new enhanced sense of human responsibility, showcasing the dependence and the insecurity of the human character, as well [3]. Other researchers consider that a human are not only a part of nature but more, one of the geological forces that act upon it; and as the illusion of our separation, as human beings, from nature diminishes, then our honesty, responsibility, and awareness towards it grow [4]. In his book: *Philosophy of the Anthropocene: The Human Turn*, Raffnsøe [3] considers that humans are introspective beings with an increased capacity to turn towards themselves, which permits mankind to assume a global responsibility. Simultaneously, as this responsibility amplifies, people focus their attention on the environment, and the human being changes, "as it investigates, articulates and redefines its own role" [3]. Consequently, people not only take responsibility towards their surroundings, but also take responsibility for how they impact the environment. Additionally, in the Anthropocene epoch, this process of turning towards ourselves – which implies a state of self-connection in order to feel and discover one's nature – includes us all; therefore, simply acknowledging the events based on our wish to understand the complexity of such a phenomenon by means of observation and description is insufficient [3]. Furthermore, as people become aware of the global existence of a vast accumulation of interdependent and interconnected relationships, they will understand that the human activity represents a singular entity. In turn, such a realization will lead to the emergence of a collective benevolent mentality towards the whole planet. The author does not assume that "the human turn" is a simple task, nor does he state that the process of taking one's responsibility is easy, but like all the other supporters of the

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Anthropocene, he considers that, at the global level, things are changing because of mankind's impact, and this ongoing change depends on us all [3]. That's why the current epoch highlights the importance of taking responsibility.

## Morality and Moral Realism

What another concept that ought to elucidate the complexity of taking responsibility is better than morality? But what is morality? Even though there are multiple definitions and theories elaborated on this topic, currently, from a philosophical viewpoint, morality can be defined from two perspectives: descriptive and normative [5]. The descriptive perspective postulates that morality is a particular code of conduct accepted and put forward by a society, by a group, or by an individual. From this perspective, which is based on the social constructs of a given referential social group, we can conclude that there are no universal moral laws applicable to all people, because morality is always understood in accordance to the social-cultural norms to which the individual adheres. The normative perspective postulates the existence of a certain code of conduct which, under certain specific conditions, would be respected by all rational persons. In other words, morality represents a code of conduct that could be respected by all beings who fulfill certain intellectual and volitional conditions, including here, almost always, the condition of rationality. Contrary to the descriptive definition, the normative definition states the existence of universal moral laws, reunited in a code of conduct, which, under certain specific conditions, can be respected by all beings, thus fulfilling these conditions classifies that being as a moral agent [5]. From now on, we will stick to the normative definition of morality, and in order to sustain the argumentation of this paper, we will now turn to the philosophical perspective of moral realism.

Moral realism is a theory which postulates that moral judgments have a degree of objectivity; hence, when such judgments are true, they are so, regardless of what any human being thinks of them, anywhere, anytime, under any circumstances. In other words, when people issue moral judgments about what is right or wrong, fair or unjust, etc., they try to mentally represent the moral reality which exists independently of any understanding of it. Correspondingly, since moral judgments are perceived as beliefs, some of which are true by virtue of their correct representation of moral deeds, moral realism is a form of cognitivism<sup>1</sup>. The main assumptions of moral realism are as follows: moral standards may be correct even if no person believes in them, or everyone relinquish these standards; an agent/being may be wrong in the process of understanding a moral truth, even if she/he has made all the epistemic effort she/he is capable of in accordance with her/his psychological characteristics; moral truths can be accessed by ideal epistemic agents at the highest level of investigation [6].

Thus, there are a number of existential moral truths, unanimously good, and by wanting to discover and behave

according to them, we do not only assume responsibility for our deeds but rather, we act in accordance with positive existential truths. The human turn is an "affective, cognitive, (...), moral and existential experience", which brings new perspectives and difficulties that we have to face [3]. Therefore, in the Anthropocene epoch, discovery and compliance of existential moral standards represent both a way of assuming responsibility and an opportunity for growth as a species, as a singular human whole.

Moral realism does not imply that any society has followed the existential moral truths, ever. Alternatively, even if someone lives in a morally defective society, in which citizens respect, to some degree, a given code of conduct, known, to some extent, by all people and established by social processes and regulated by the law, that is, such a society is moral in accordance with the descriptive definition of morality, then behaviours of someone living in such a society would approximate to a certain extent morality as defined by the normative perspective. Furthermore, natural law theories of morality postulate that any rational entity, within any society, has a natural and intuitive ability to recognize the actions that morality encourages or discourages [5]. This supposition is sustained by the social intuitionist model [7]. The previous assertions are in perfect alignment with moral realism, because existential moral truths are accessible to the extent that our existence is accessible to us, but our understanding of them is both based on, and limited by our biological and cognitive characteristics. Even though we do not know how to behave, probably because in all our history we do not have a social model to follow, in the Anthropocene epoch, we will only have to wish to acknowledge and apply morality, while also being optimistic that reason, intuition and empathy will lead us to a better life for the whole planetary system. From this perspective, the self-implementation of moral behaviours, and especially the discovery of moral truths that ought to guide such behaviours will remain, to a certain extent, and possibly for a long time, if not forever, a matter of philosophy. On the other hand, Shafer-Landau [3] considers that any plausible theory of morality postulates that the understanding of moral truths is sometimes, if not always, dependent on the intrapsychic processes of the agent in question, because motivations and attitudes that influence a subject to act morally or immorally can never be understood without reference to what is happening in that being's mind. Moreover, Tiberius [8] believes that, since all branches of science have distanced themselves from their primordial philosophical basis, and because many philosophical questions necessitate empirical suppositions to be resolved, morality may be somewhat "entrusted" to the scientists, because collaboration between the two fields will facilitate a better understanding of morality. For that reason, there should not be a distinct gap between the philosophical and the scientific viewpoints on morality. Going beyond the definition that we adopt about morality, and regardless of the theory in virtue of which we understand it, morality seems to belong, to a greater extent, to the field of philosophy. Therefore, the question arises: how can science contribute to?

<sup>1</sup> In this case, "cognitivism" refers to its philosophical meaning, not its psychological sense.

## Morality and Psychology

A part of the answer to this question is provided by psychology, which studies moral behaviours. In psychology, and within its sub-branch: social psychology, the moral behaviour is understood based on the consensual expectancy of doing what is fair and just; while respecting the values and norms of a society is considered to be a normative<sup>2</sup> behaviour, of course, in some cases, a behaviour can be both moral and normative [9].

From a psychological perspective, moral behaviour is understood as a cognitive abstract-inferential and rapid-emotional processing of the perceived input. In other words, the moral behaviour results from the interaction of two interconnected social skills: the Theory of Mind (ToM) and empathy<sup>3</sup> [10]. Theory of mind is the ability to comprehend the thoughts, desires and behavioural dispositions of others through an abstract inference [11]. Empathy is the capacity to automatically adopt the emotional state of another person while maintaining a self-other distinction [12]. Seen from this standpoint, the moral cognition encompasses both: the representation of intentions and possible behaviours of others, as well as, the experience of their emotional states [13]. This statement is supported by the fact that, in the evolution of primates, the two aforementioned processes precede the manifestation of mature moral reflection [14].

## Neuroanatomic Aspects of Morality

Moreover, this conceptual model has a neurological basis. A 2012 meta-analysis of neuroimaging studies highlights the regions of the brain involved in moral cognition as: bilateral ventromedial/ Front Polar/ Dorsomedial Prefrontal Cortex (vmPFC/FP/dmPFC), Precuneus (Prec), Temporo-Parietal Junction (TPJ), Posterior Cingulate Cortex (PCC), the right Temporal Pole (TP), Right Middle Temporal Gyrus (MTG), and left amygdala (AM). Additionally, all these brain regions are either involved in the processes of ToM and moral cognition or involved in the processes of empathy and moral cognition; the neuroanatomic regions involved in all three mental processes are: the bilateral TPJ, dmPFC, and right MTG, which form a neural network with activation potential in socio-cognitive contexts [10]. Another meta-analysis of neuroimaging studies, which took into account the behavioural responses to implicit and non-implicit moral stimuli, identifies the brain regions involved in moral judgment as: Dorsomedial Prefrontal Cortex (dmPFC), Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex (vmPFC), Posterior Cingulate Cortex (PCC), Temporal Pole (TP), Temporo- Parietal Junction (TPJ) and Inferior Frontal Gyrus (IFG); these neural areas that get involved in perceptual, attentional and mnemonic processes, also carry out cognitions and emotions about given social contexts,

<sup>2</sup> In this context, the term "normative" is used in a sense other than its meaning used in philosophy. The psychological approach to normative behaviours is compatible with the descriptive definition of morality used in philosophy. Furthermore, in this case, moral behaviour is rather compatible with the normative philosophical definition of morality.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive explanation. Bzdok, et al. [10].

while contributing to the elaboration of decisions in social circumstances [15]. Thus, these findings are in line with the previous meta-analysis, showcasing that moral judgments are based on social-relational abilities.

At first glance, we can say that moral reasoning is a "cold", emotionless cognitive process, since the regions of the neocortex that govern this process have developed somewhat "recently" in phylogenesis, but this process was rather constrained by evolutionary pressures to work alongside emotional states, not in their absence; that is why, in our everyday lives, the experience of morality and the formation of moral cognition, in relation to the external environmental requirements, awaken in us affective states. Due to these emotional states and through our social-relational abilities, which govern moral cognition (theory of mind and empathy) the majority of our conceptual changes about what is good or bad, moral or immoral occur in social contexts [16]. In line with this view, many researchers consider moral behaviour to be constituted by integrating emotional processes and social cognitive abilities, which then are manifested in important social actions and valuable behaviours [17]. To further understand moral reasoning, we should focus on how moral cognition develops.

## Moral Development

Although elaborated in 1958, Lawrence Kohlberg's description of the formation and development of moral reasoning and moral behaviour is considered significant, since his theory takes into account the perception of peers, their social-cognitive representation and the emotional processes involved. According to the cross-cultural longitudinal studies conducted by him, moral reasoning develops over time, in three levels, each level having two stages<sup>4</sup>. In line with this cognitive developmental model, one's moral reasoning structure presents the following characteristics: the stages are thought-driven systems, and within each stage the individual develops consistent moral judgments required to serve in different problematic situations or contexts; under all conditions, except in the case of traumatic experiences, regression is never recorded, individuals are always progressing to the next stages, and these stages cannot be leapt; moral reasoning of a higher stage includes, integrates and develops upon the moral cognitions of the prior phase; also, there is a tendency to function at the highest stage, that is to use increasingly advanced moral judgments, which offer new perspectives and criteria for the evaluation of moral behaviours; all these aspects are true in all cultures, with differences only in the speed and progress that an individual can reach [18]. Based on this cognitive developmental model one can assume that the changes in our perspectives, i.e. the new attitudes emerging from our better understanding of others' emotions and thoughts in different social contexts, are those that favour the transition from a lower stage to a higher one, implicitly from one level to another [17]. Therefore, the relationship between one person's cognitive structure and the complexity of the environmental requirements causes moral development [22]. Moreover, during this process, the individual

<sup>4</sup> For a complete description see Kohlberg and Hersh [19].

inevitably encounters a series of conflictual moral situations that his moral reasoning capacity cannot solve, which induces a cognitive imbalance, in turn. The more the subject accommodates and assimilates new inputs in such situations, the greater the chances are that the subject will develop new and complex ways of understanding and solving moral conflicts, that is stepping into a higher moral level, and thus, overcoming the cognitive imbalance ([17]).

These statements are consistent with the scientific perspective on the development of empathy, according to which empathy develops during four stages [18]. In the last phase, which begins between 8 to 12 years of age, when the subject is able to distinguish between her/him and others and understands that people have their own identity, then she/he understands that others feel pleasure and pain not only in the present but also over time. Therefore, although the present empathetic response is preserved, the degree to which persistent emotions of others are felt by the subject intensifies – the more clues the subject gets about others' emotional states, the stronger she/he feels them. Concurrently, due to cognitive development with age, through ToM the subject intuitively constructs a mental representation of another's degree of distress. When this representation is considered to be, even a bit, below the inferior standard of the subject's well-being, then she/he experiences an empathic distress; such a thing can happen, even if the present behaviours of those observed contradict the subject's general representation. Also, the subject can empathically feel the affective state of a whole social group, and because all forms of suffering have a common emotional core, she/he may experience a social empathic distress. The larger the group is, the clearer the signs of its suffering are, and the longer the suffering is, then the stronger the emotional resonance of the subject to the sufferance, and the predisposition to provide help are. In other words, the empathic distress can be viewed as “a prosocial motive, with perhaps a quasi-egoistic dimension” [18]. Thus, to the extent that the predisposition to provide help increases with the empathic realization of the need for help, the chances of reaching higher levels of moral development rise with the increasing number of confrontations with conflicting moral situations. Living in today's world, it is easy to understand why moral development relies on the process of empathy alongside that of the theory of mind.

### The Similar Psychological Functionality of Moral Processes for Both Sexes

Since women are phylogenetically programmed to provide and seek more affection, to be more interested in other's needs and to try to fulfil those needs more often, the basis of these behaviours being the relationship with their own child that mothers have had throughout history, we would be tempted to believe that women are more prone to develop humanistic moral values. But this intuition does not prove to be real, especially in the context of globalization and current social changes [18]. A study conducted at the end of the last century shows that there is more similarity between the moral orientations of men and women within the same culture than there is between either male

or female orientations across cultures [19]. A more recent meta-analysis provides empirical evidence supporting the idea that there is no gender difference in moral orientation [20]. Bearing that in mind, we can now return to the link between philosophy and psychology.

### The Philosophical and Psychological Importance of Morality

Kohlberg's moral development theory has interdisciplinary connections with education sciences and philosophy [7]. In fact, the sixth stage, that of the universal ethical principle, which states that behaving morally is defined by the subject's own conscious choice to act in accordance with the universal principles of “justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons” [21], is perfectly consistent with both the normative definition of morality and with the assumptions of moral realism. Therefore, the climax of moral development means aligning our behaviours (and attitudes) with objective moral principles. This means nurturing our intrinsic potential to discover the moral truths and trying to guide our conduct after them. Kohlberg's theory may also be viewed as empirical support for moral realism. Additionally, the empathic distress and aiding are positively associated with an increase in perceptual similarity between the victim and the person providing help (excepting the situation in which the level of empathic distress increases so much that it becomes harmful towards the subject, in which case the person will focus on herself/himself, not on the victim) [7]. Therefore, the human turns, which Raffnsøe [3] talks about, is favoured, among other things, by an aversive empathic distress. Thus, the discovery of true moral principles and guiding our conduct according to them could be both a way of preventing the emotional distress, as much as, a way to increase the similarity between people [22,23]. Consequently, the search for, and application of the objective moral truths, coming from our internal motivation to take responsibility and sustained by the two social abilities that underlie moral behaviour, can represent the path to a positive change for mankind, in the Anthropocene epoch.

This article is intended to serve as a bridge between the disciplines of philosophy and psychology hoping to contribute to the future collaboration projects between philosophers, psychologists, and other scientists that ought to provide the common woman and man with practical ways of developing their moral behaviours, thus further adding to the praxis of moral psychology. Furthermore, this article wishes to propose the idea that, in the current epoch of the Anthropocene, assuming one's moral responsibility, which means seeking to behave in accordance to the universal moral truths, will prove to have constructive collective consequences. Therefore, it is proposed that one of the best ways to approach the already major problems, such as climate change, is to nurture the much required individual self-discovery of the universal moral truths, that which is the essence of the ultimate moral development.

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