



Can We Save Morality's Reputation?

Reclaiming morals in the post-truth world


By **Petrică Nițoaia**

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I have a friend who is queer, vegetarian and one of the nicest people you'll ever meet. Some would describe her as quite the good *moral* example too... Yet she wouldn't like that at all, because she associates ethics with religious prejudice. Though partly inspired by Nietzsche's work, she often points to something even more important: how 'morality' was used by empires of the past to erase native cultures.

Another friend was sharing his thoughts on a piece of mine about animal ethics. But out of a sudden, he became overwhelmed by memories of his home country, where morality meant baseless shaming by society at large towards misfitting individuals. Hence, he would frame the idea of being nicer to animals in terms of humanism, enlightenment, empathy or as a question of rights. Certainly *not* one of ethics. I found myself again discussing with a

kind, charismatic and empathetic person, whose way of being could easily be complimented as moral, yet who very much disliked even the mention of the word.

Why is there such a difference between the picture of morality one gets from books and the one so many people encounter in real life? 

How can this be? Both words, ‘morality’ and ‘ethics,’ refer to the same ideas and, in my experience, philosophy books on the topic promote care and kindness. Why is there such a difference between the picture of morality one gets from books and the one so many people encounter in real life? The reasons are, of course, obvious. Less so is whether we can reclaim morals from the misuse of the past or if it is even worth trying.

A stained history

In the most basic (descriptive) use, ‘morality’ means the code of conduct used by an individual or group – like a ‘toolbox’ helping us decide between right and wrong. But trouble begins when we look at its normative use: a code of conduct ‘that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational people’ (SEP). Every human society has some sort of mutually agreed-upon (or enforced) rules of conduct; as Peter Singer noted, ‘ethics is inescapable.’ Now, humans themselves and the societies they build are different, so no wonder there is disagreement about the nature of morality, the extent to which it could or should influence our behaviour and who even has the authority to make moral statements.


Across history, the most common ways moral teachings have gone wrong were

- *when the ideas themselves were really bad or*
- *when otherwise well-intended teachings were misused.*

Good moral systems must account for both – to be able to improve with time and to prevent wanton harm in the name of moral indignation. While people do happen to discard harmful teachings, other times they dogmatically and violently impose them upon others. Instead of doing any of that dogmatism here, let us see some examples:

In *Communist Romania*, you'd be in big trouble if you had long hair – only a few artists were given official documents that allowed it (North Korea still allows only for a small choice of hairstyles). Such rules, often disguised as moral precepts, were tools of totalitarian control. Lack of compliance meant saying goodbye to your hair or even beatings, prison time, forced labour and constant harassment by the secret police. But perhaps the practice most known for crimes committed in the name of 'morality' is *colonialism*.

Nobody expects *the Spanish Inquisition* to still be relevant, but it is the most famous historical account of a religious institution using morality as a tool of persecution. Even explicitly kind religions like Zen Buddhism have been historically hijacked (see the book *Zen at War*). In our times, Iran's *Morality Police* mainly deals with beating, imprisoning or even killing women who do not follow the official dress code. Since I do not want to be on Iran's wanted list, I will let the readers decide for themselves how moral said police is.

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views.* 

To most of us, it is obvious why large hierarchical institutions often abuse power and morals, but we can't help being surprised when influential philosophers hold really odd views. *Immanuel Kant*, for example, often made racist remarks and his egalitarianism was rather meant for white males only (Ramsauer, 2023). Similarly, *Arthur Schopenhauer*, despite being able to clearly point out how the unfair treatment of women in his day and age resulted in their apparent inferiority to men, still held sexist views. Academic consensus attributes this contradictory view, at least partly, to his mommy issues.

Lastly, *Jeremy Bentham* started the modern utilitarian movement, one of

the most inclusive moral systems around, since, in his own words, ‘The question [regarding animals] is not, *Can they reason?*, nor *Can they talk?* but, *Can they suffer?* Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being?’ Yet, he also inspired the building of maximum-security prisons. Are we really to accept that such a draconian institution is on the path of maximising happiness? Using the same utilitarian moral reasoning, we can quite simply answer with ‘Yes’ to the question ‘*Are prisons obsolete?*’

The past and present of humanity abound with similar examples. Reading such a list, can one really be blamed for arguing that humanity is a moral disaster, a claim many pessimist philosophers entertain? But what else can we learn from such a messy history?

This is not the epic moment when I uncover some ancient lost knowledge or relay how I singlehandedly found a uniquely grandiose universal moral code. No! Rather, we can be a great deal humbler: moral indignation *can* be misused as an excuse to do mean stuff; even great philosophers can be wrong on some topics; it is a healthy exercise to scrutinise our moral values, both at an individual and societal level; building better institutions and human relations is a constant work, and the moment we think we’re done is exactly when unprincipled people start taking advantage of our comfort. While we can’t shame the shameless, let us see if we can reclaim morality’s reputation and usefulness.

Why still talk about morals?


The literature on ethics is like a big coal mine: lots of useful but uninspiring stuff, some rotten corners, but also gems waiting to be discovered. What follows are, to my knowledge, the best developments pointing towards why moral inquiry can still be a force for good. These are rational free choice, a good dose of humbleness and the openness to dialogue.

A touch of freshness: Free choice

The last couple hundred years saw an increase in secular moral ideas (inspired at least partly by contact between different people and traditions). This liberating development started to diminish the scope of moral thinking; it has freed us from the restrictions regarding sex, choice of clothes, speech,

rituals of submission to higher social classes, etc. It has also brought us the freedom to *not* be religious. Practical, secular morality nowadays is largely preoccupied with *ways to increase well-being* and *reduce suffering* (of humans and animals).

While I salute this development, this is not meant to say that religious morality is irrational, but rather that it is not so *free*. If you believe hell exists, then isn't it rational to follow the religious law?! When it comes to the secular side of things, moralists can go on and on about responsibilities and obligations, but at the end of the day, it is simply a matter of choice and your best judgement to help those in need or pursue solely selfish interests. But how can moralists (both spiritual and secular) claim their choices to be *rational* when they got things wrong so often? Precisely here is where a good dose of humbleness and openness to dialogue becomes important.

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Far be it from me to suggest that morality is or should be the only way to make decisions. What I defend here is its importance and, in some cases, even primacy. That is because instincts, desires or emotions can be unreliable. Laws, culture, traditions and pragmatic reasons are of great importance too when making choices; however, these are precisely the cases we often *use moral arguments* in order to reform or improve. Take the example of a farmer who behaves with animals based on her values, the day's mood, the current laws and the likelihood for them to be implemented. But the study of ethics will help her decide between building a *chicken* farm or a *chickpea* farm. Or between a factory farm and an a sanctuary for animals.

There is, of course, much more to this discussion and the many factors that interplay when we make decisions. But in an era where war, prices, exploitation and climate change are on the rise, moral thinking can become a viable alternative for improving our societies and healing them from grifters, dictators and oligarchs!

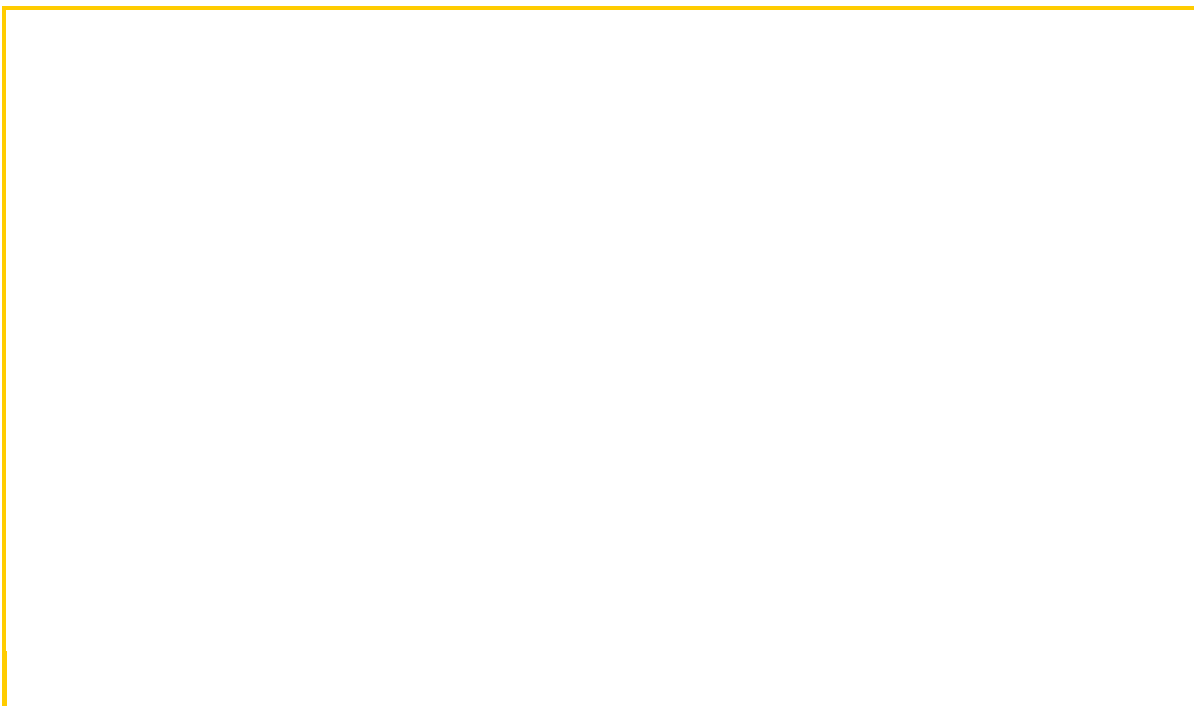
Dialogue as an antidote to relativism

Moral relativism is not just about the ‘shock of realization that one’s ethical views are grounded in custom, and that if one had been brought up in a different society with different customs, one would have different ethical views’ (Peter Singer). Sometimes, it is the result of the knowledge that violent colonial regimes or religious institutions were imposed under the guise of morality, hence the fear that moral thinking is bound to produce monstrous effects.

The main attraction of moral relativism rests in its respect for other cultures. Its most popular iterations are

- the idea that all moral systems are equally good or
- that there is no way to decide which moral position is preferable to another.

As any clever reader has noticed, the issue here is that some moral dilemmas are not solved by looking the other way. More significantly, David Graeber (*Possibilities*) argues that relativism promotes the status quo and sometimes ends up defending existing unfair structures of power. That is because, in order to be consistent, ‘the classic relativist has to assume that all cultures or societies do have structures of authority similar enough that they can be identified by an outside observer, and, furthermore, that these structures are intrinsically legitimate. The political implications are, to say the least, disturbing.’



A solution to this is the very human practice of *honest, genuine discussion*. This can happen both between individuals and societies. When facing slimy corporations, oligarchs and violent ideologies, it is this very human curiosity and love for discussion that can prove to be a change for good. But did such intercultural conversation lead to any moral improvement?

More than we usually realise. Some examples:


- The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was adopted in 1948 and continues to be a reference document of outstanding importance in politics. Many countries use it to draft fairer legislation while dictators constantly try to delegitimise it, since it is an obvious moral challenge to their rule. This document was voted for by such diverse states as India, China, the US, the UK, Paraguay, Brazil, Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Thailand, etc. I dearly recommend reading at least the Wikipedia page about this document, especially the list of rights, the reasons why a few states abstained from the vote and the motivations of those who still criticise it.
- There never was any single thing all humans or political groups agreed on. This is no different when it comes to moral issues. The closest to an exception from this is the fact that nowadays, *slavery is illegal in all countries!* While there were societies designed specifically to prevent such gross indignity and the practice was abolished in the past too, for example, by ancient Indian emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BC, never was there such a global de facto condemnation and delegitimization. Of any practice, for that matter. Slavery is also one of the clearest examples where moral outrage was a defining factor in the change for good.
- One of the social causes of our times is *the treatment of animals*. Kindness towards animals is not a new idea, as it has been promoted through religions such as Jainism or by thinkers such as Mahavira, al Ma'arri, Mary Shelley, Tolstoy, Singer, etc. Though empathy, health, preference or environmental concerns are also used as reasons for treating animals better, one of the most important is the ethical one: that we shouldn't needlessly harm them and they don't deserve to be treated as objects. To this end, people from around the world join forces

in order to find cruelty-free alternatives. In terms of food, they promote traditional and novel alternatives such as vegetable soups from Europe, tofu dishes from China, and the rich vegetarian cuisine of India or the Middle East. Cruelty-free cosmetics, clothes and other products are also developed in a celebration of human creativity, respect for other animals and consciousness about our place in this world: as the only beings that *can* be moral.

There is another reason why honest, respectful moral dialogue is important. As Nietzsche once wrote, ‘Supposing that Truth is a woman – what then? Is there not ground for suspecting that all philosophers, in so far as they have been dogmatists, have failed to understand women [...]?’ Learning from his pointy remark but disregarding everything else he wrote on ethics, if we want our moral choices to be more reliable, better informed and useful, it is a good idea to explore other views and cultures – even those doubting any and all truth or use of morality.

Humble but standing up for what is right!

Will I be able to convince my Nietzsche-loving friend about the benefits of a secular, dialogical approach to morality? How about convincing my other mate that we can have a country where morality is a force for good? This is not the point. The point is to have better discussions about this topic. And I believe it is important to keep talking about it: morality is one of the few weapons we have against oppression, besides violent resistance! If we give up on it, what are we left with besides *might makes right*?

Morality is one of the few weapons we have against oppression, besides violent resistance. 

People say important things are worth working for. When it comes to morality, we know it can be used for nefarious purposes. Never will all humans agree on anything and sooner or later, we’ll mess up even fair moral systems. Even more so, philosopher John Gray reminds us that morality does not stack up like technology. While technological progress is linear,

ethical improvements can easily be lost. For example, we thought that fascism was forever in the dustbin of history, but it revives today. Even though we abolished slavery, tens of millions of people are still in shackles (and other forms of exploitation are on the rise). The legal rights of women and sexual minorities were better in the Soviet Union under Lenin than under the current Russian regime. The career of a man like Putin can single-handedly destroy the moral progress achieved over hundreds of years.

Despite all this, we are around and have to make choices. Being humble about our moral capacities and recognising the failures of the past doesn't mean we are supposed to just sit around and ponder. Knowledge begets action. We can reclaim the moral discourse from the hands of violent influencers. We ought to learn from moral relativism and promote kind, respectful moral dialogue. Or, as Catia Faria wrote: 'Some might say that the conclusions reached throughout this book are, perhaps, too demanding. In reply, let me simply state I do not believe this is so. Rather, it is because the world is so far removed from the best possible scenario that such demands are made on us. [...] We should be wary of cosy moral beliefs. Philosophers should be revisionists. If our beliefs are wrong, we should change them. If things are bad, we should act accordingly.'

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Petrică Nițoaia is a former shepherd, passionate about philosophy and animal ethics. He writes mainly on the ethics of food production, wild animal suffering, human rights and philosophical pessimism. He finds philosophy and history not only fascinating but also fun and useful for making the world a more joyful and fair place for all.

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Recommendation:

Many embodied the ideals proposed in this article, but let me part with reminding you about one of the most important people in the development of cruelty-free cosmetics and medicine: *Ethics into Action: Henry Spira and the Animal Rights Movement* by Peter Singer.

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