The Power of the Moral and a New Politics

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Abstract

What does it mean to reason morally, and how can this understanding help society? This chapter gives a reader-friendly overview of what can be called the power of the moral, and how it can serve as a basis for a new politics. It argues that moral reasoning is widespread but still implicit, which leads to certain problems that can be solved by a better understanding of the moral. The chapter argues that a moral is a reason to act for the author, in line with the familiar intuition of the *moral of the story*. Beyond this intuitive grounding, the account draws on neuroscience and Active Inference, which is arguably the most promising candidate for a unified theory of the brain, discussed in the next chapter.

Accordingly, the understanding of the moral carries a certain power: it can fulfill several social jobs. Its first power is *clarification*, which counters three ambiguity problems in public life: accusations of amorality, misunderstandings in disagreement, and unchallenged assumptions. Its second power is *confrontation*: asking people to reveal their moral exposes the gap between their self-image and their actual reasoning, thereby making their own pride push them towards honest and moral reasoning. Its third power is *consolation*: the moral offers a minimal direction that consoles our existential need for direction and therefore stops wishful thinking. Taken together, these powers could help society respond to polarization and democratic deadlock. The chapter ends by sketching how the moral could become a basis for a new kind of politics.

Introduction

Who is reasoning morally, especially in important situations like politics? It is not uncommon for an activist to claim this title, whilst accusing the other group of amoral reasoning (Skitka et al., 2021; Ryan, 2017; Iyengar et al., 2019). These accusations can in turn justify inter-group conflict, even when both parties were actually using moral reasoning.

Society faces three ambiguity problems that arise from being limited to implicit moral reasoning. The first problem is *amorality accusations*, which occur because, when it is unclear what moral reasoning is, it becomes easier to see the moral as amoral.

The second ambiguity problem is *disagreements by misunderstandings.* When moral reasoning is implicit, the underlying understanding of the situation remains hidden and it becomes hard to see whether the disagreement is caused by a misunderstanding. These disagreements could have been avoidable by better mutual understanding, and evidence suggests that many such disagreements exist (Lees and Cikara, 2021; Moore-Berg et al., 2020). Democracy thrives on consensus and these disagreements unneces-

sarily stagnates it.

The third ambiguity problem is *unchallenged assumptions*. Because when moral reasoning is implicit, the underlying assumptions stay hidden, and this makes them harder for others to challenge. This is especially problematic in the case of wishful thinkers, for these do not challenge their own assumptions themselves. Although people generally do not want to see themselves as thinking wishfully, evidence suggests that it still occurs (Kahan, 2013; Effron and Helgason, 2022; Stanovich and Toplak, 2023; Porter et al., 2022). Here again, we lack shared verification conditions: when is someone honestly following the evidence, and when do they hold a belief, not because evidence suggests it, but because they want it to be true? This is the third and final ambiguity problem.

These problems are widely recognized, even if not always under these names. One of the clearest attempts to clarify these ambiguities is found in deliberative democracy, moral deliberation, and citizens' assemblies. Under good conditions, these work: they can improve mutual understanding, reduce polarization, and produce more considered judgments (OECD, 2020; Beauvais and Warren, 2019; Fishkin et al., 2021; Jong, 2024). When people are brought together around a table and there is an initial disagreement, it is often only a matter of time before they realize that the others are also reasoning morally, that their disagreement was based on a misunderstanding, and that, if people dare to doubt their own positions, agreement follows.

However, there is a crucial flaw in these initiatives; these require too great of a commitment to guarantee widespread clarification (OECD, 2020; OECD, 2025). These events require time and attention, which are not resources we can expect everyone in society to have, especially as they become scarcer every day. This creates the need for something stronger, and I claim that the power of the moral can answer this need.

This understanding of the moral does not come from nowhere, for it is based on arguably the most promising unified theory of the brain: Active Inference (Friston, 2010; Parr et al., 2022). Active Inference formalizes how desires and beliefs combine into reasons to act. Since, on the present account, a moral is a reason for the author to act, the moral gains the kind of exactness that is crucial if we are to solve the ambiguity problems.

The conceptual roots of Active Inference begin with perception. They can be traced back, in a broad philosophical sense, to Plato's allegory of the cave, Ibn al-Haytham's work on optics, and Kant's distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal (Plato, n.d.; Ibn al-Haytham, 1989; Kant, 1998). The issue then entered the scientific domain through Helmholtz's account of perception as unconscious inference (Helmholtz, 1925). From there, this line of thought developed into the Bayesian Brain Hypothesis, predictive coding, and predictive processing (Knill and Pouget, 2004; Rao and Ballard, 1999; Clark, 2013). Eventually, action itself came to be understood as a form of inference, leading to Active Inference, especially through

the work of Karl Friston (Friston, 2010). Active Inference can therefore be seen as a current culmination of this long development in thought.

And just as neuroscience is now undergoing a transformation in clarity by bringing together these strands of collective human thought, I believe that this clarity can also be extended to morality. In this way, the morals, which were hidden for so long, can finally be revealed and serve as a basis for a new kind of politics - one capable of dealing with the ambiguity problems.

The first section argues that a moral is best understood as a reason for the author to act, using the intuition of the *moral of the story*. The second section shows how this understanding can fulfill the clarification job by addressing all three ambiguity problems through a political example. The third section explains how the moral can also fulfill the confrontation job, and how much confrontation we should expect. The fourth section shows how the moral can fulfill the consolation job by offering a minimal direction: a form of guidance that helps address our existential need for direction, stopping wishful thinking. The chapter ends by sketching how the moral could become a basis for a new kind of politics.

See next chapter for technical and neurological details, which follows a moral calculus. The full book (in progress) can be seen here: Consciousness, Conscience and the Calling Poem.

Meaning of a Moral

This section develops the central proposal. I begin with two simple stories, and then move toward a more general account of what a moral is.

Stories

Consider the following two stories:

> **Story 1:** Alex and Blake are in a store where they have the opportunity to steal. Alex does not steal and contributes to the collective trust in the society. Blake does steal, other see this and follow Blake's examples, leading to a deterioration of trust in the society. Now everyone steals.
>
> **Story 2:** Alex and Blake are both people pleasers. Alex starts declining help to respect their own needs. Blake keeps helping, and as a result, completely drains and ruins themself.

How should the morals of the stories be understood here? Simply saying "do not steal" or "decline help" does not suffice. In the first story, one can imagine cases in which stealing may in fact be justified, for instance when a starving child steals from a wealthy and corrupt person. In the second

story, the lesson is not simply "decline help," because there are obviously situations in which helping is the right thing to do. So the moral must be sensitive to context.

Context of the moral

The moral, then, must respect the full relevant context. With that in mind, I propose the following working definition: *the moral is the best story the author can tell through their actions, given a situation.* This situation can also be referred as the belief of the moral, for it is in this belief that the moral is grounded. So, a moral is a story within the right context, and this context can be illustrated, see 1 and 2 for the first and second stories respectively. See 3 for the general context and the Active Inference analogue.

Applied to the first story, the situation is that someone is in a shop and has the opportunity to steal. From there, different stories can be told through ones actions: one can steal or not. If one steals, one tells the story of someone who serves themself in a way that undermines shared trust. If one does not steal, one tells the story of someone who resists the urge to steal and thereby helps sustain trust. The same general structure applies to the second story. The point is not that one action type is always right in every context, but that every concrete choice moment allows multiple possible stories, and it is in this context that one can find the moral. This, by using the *authors valuation.*

A concern is that of interpretation intention mismatch, be it for the story or the belief. See the last section of this chapter to see how the Moral Map deals with this.

Authors Valuation

To find the moral, one adopts the perspective of the author and asks how valuable it is to realize each of these possible stories through one's action. The valuation of the author is *role-independent*, meaning that the author does not care what their role in the story is. This valuation then becomes the motivation to act in the context where one can actually make this choice.

This means for the first story that it does not matter for the author if they are the one who can steal, the shop owner or a bystander. Or, for the second story, whether they is the people pleaser or the one receiving help. The value is independent of ones role in the story.

The authors valuation then contrasts with *perspectival valuation*, which is valuation that *does* depend on ones role in the story, and especially the relations this role has with other roles. These valuations can conflict with the author. In the first story, the urge to steal is a perspectival *for-me-ness* valuation, and in the second story, the urge to help is a perspectival *for-you-ness* valuation. Other personal examples are anger and lust. In sports

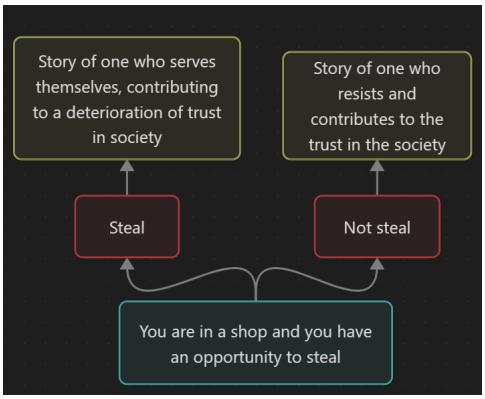

Figure 1: This is the context of the moral for story one. The moral here is the best story that one can tell through their actions in that situation, for the author.

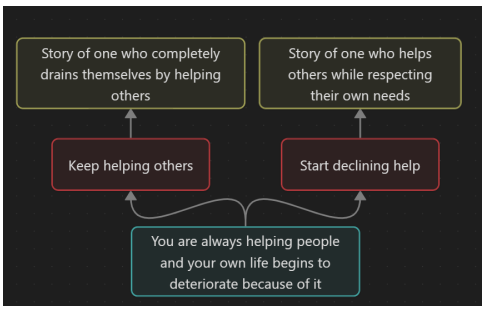

Figure 2: This is the context of the moral for story two. The moral here is the best story that one can tell through their actions in that situation, for the author.

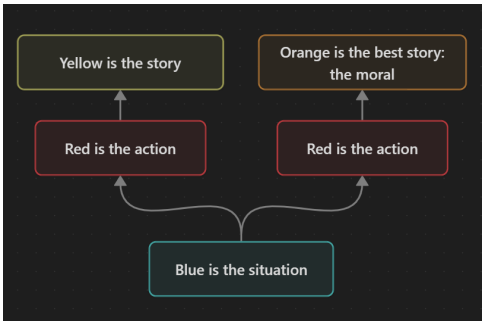

Figure 3: General context of a moral, with the moral being the best story the author can tell through their actions, given the situation. The moral is experienced as the story most beautiful to manifest.

In Active Inference, blue is the generative model, red is the policy, and yellow are the predicted outcomes under the policy. The moral is the best outcome under the author's preference function: passive impartiality.

and in some politics, this often appears as an *us versus them* mentality, in which the primary aim is for *us* to defeat *them*.

The point is not that the author ignores the relations and becomes fully impartial, because the relations matter also for the story, but that moral reasoning begins when one looks at the story without regard what role they will inhabit, and one asks how valuable it is to realize these stories.

This authorial valuation can make the moral feel universal, because moral convictions are often experienced as objectively and generally valid rather than as merely personal preferences. This gives moral reasoning its force, but also its danger: when people experience their own moral view as universally true, they may become less tolerant of disagreement and more resistant to compromise (Skitka et al., 2021). Still, the author's perspective can also provide a shared vantage point, a standpoint from which one tries to correct merely private or role-bound reactions by considering the situation from a more general perspective (Cohon, 1997; Raphael, 2007). In this sense, the author's perspective does not guarantee agreement, but it can help people move beyond purely personal or partisan differences.

Whether the authors valuation exists and can be attained can be understood as an empirical question. The neurological interpretation of the authors valuation is a specific way of attending to outcomes in choice moments, called *passive impartiality*. It has specific neural signatures which science has yet to test. Furthermore, the general context of a moral can be understood within Active Inference, which is the most promising model of the brain. For further information and a full (computational) neurological formalization of a moral, see next chapter.

The authorial value can be explained in various ways. One way is to explain this value by resorting to terms like; fairness, honesty, harm, well-being and justice. One may also attempt an evolutionary explanation, for instance by arguing that the authorial valuation support survival, coordination, or social stability. But none of those explanations are needed in order to recognize the phenomenon itself. For present purposes, what matters is the valuation as experienced.

Experientially, this value can be described in several ways. It can be described as how right or wrong a story feels. Or as the intrinsic value of a story, where the story does not serve our needs, rather, we serve the story. In what follows, I will often use the language of *beauty*: the moral is the story that feels most beautiful to manifest. For me, that is often a deeply sentimental experience. I stress, however, that this is beauty in a *manifesting* context, not beauty in a merely *beholding* context, which belongs more obviously to aesthetics. See next chapter for a theological interpretation and relation of morality with aesthetics.

The Moral

Once one has adopted this valuation, one can determine the best story one can tell through one's action in the given situation. That best story is the *moral*. A story is therefore a moral only in a specific context: namely, when it is the best story available to the author and can be told through their action. *Morality* is then simply talk of morals. A *moral disagreement* occurs when, at the same choice moment, different people follow different morals, often leading to disagreement in action.

So, when I ask, given the situation, what is now the most beautiful story I can manifest through my actions, the answer is the moral. To follow a moral is to commit to the corresponding action. This is what it means to use *moral reasons.*

In the first and second stories above, the moral would, for me, be the story realized by not stealing in the first case and by declining help in the second. This also shows that being moral and being nice are not the same thing. On this account, empathic motivation and moral motivation can diverge. More generally, moral motivation is not dependent by the relations one happens to stand in to other people; rather, it is governed by what one sees as the most beautiful story to manifest.

To summarize: to reason morally is to reason as an author. One asks, often implicitly, given the situation, what is now the most beautiful story to manifest through my actions? However, adopting the authors valuation does not mean that one is aware of the context of their moral, which leads to problems discussed in the next sections.

This proposal is motivated by the intuition behind the phrase "the moral of the story". But, an additional justification is that all of moral philosophy can be recast as using implicit and often indirect morals in this reading. For details about this, and how the meaning of moral relates with other meanings in the literature, see next chapter.

Clarification

This section argues that making the morals explicit, called *moral revealment*, solves the ambiguity problems described above. The point is not that every disagreement will disappear, but that it comes to light whether the disagreement was real or based on a misunderstanding. To demonstrate this, political examples will be discussed and in particular the transgender debate for its relative simplicity.

Ambiguity problems

To restate, there are three ambiguity problems that result from being limited to implicit moral reasoning:

1. **Amorality accusations**: due to lack understanding what it means to reason morally, it becomes hard to check whether you or the other party reason moral or amoral. This is the first ambiguity problem.

2. **Disagreement by misunderstanding:** when moral reasoning is implicit, the underlying understanding of the situation remains hidden and it becomes hard to see whether the disagreement is caused by a misunderstanding.

3. **Unchallenged assumptions:** because moral reasoning remains implicit, its underlying assumptions stay hidden and this makes them harder for others to challenge. This is especially problematic in the case of wishful thinkers, for these do not challenge their own assumptions themselves.

As noted earlier, deliberation and citizens' assemblies can help solve such problems by bringing people together to talk under better conditions. However, because these are demanding institutions, I want to argue that the same clarifying work can also be done in a lighter and more portable way: through *moral revealment*.

Political Example Start

Political morals are often grounded in complex situations. Questions about housing, immigration, taxation, or climate policy concern open systems in which consequences are difficult to predict and model with confidence. The transgender situation is hard due to its neurological complexity and social complexity, but the advantage is that, contrasting with the previous examples, the brain can be studied as a close system. This is why I will treat this example here.

Consider the following political question: how should society treat people who identify as transgender? More specifically, how should the state care for transgender people?

Here are two possible positions that people may take in this debate:

1. The state should not pay for gender-affirming care, because transgender identification is seen as confusion and the only acceptable treatment is conversion back to a natural state; on this view, society must be protected against what is perceived as degeneracy.

2. Gender-affirming care can reduce suffering and improve well-being, and therefore society should accommodate these needs; on this view, the state should make available appropriate forms of social, psychological, and medical care

What happens if the people in these camps are asked to reveal their morals?

Moral Revealment

Instead of waiting for clarification to emerge only at the end of a long and heated conversation, one can ask a person to reveal their moral. To reveal a moral, one must supply the context in which it arises. In practice, this means that a person states their understanding of the situation, the possible stories they believe can be told through different actions, and the story they regard as best from the standpoint of the author, following the structure of 3.

In other words, they make explicit what they take the situation to be, what consequences or narratives they think flow from the available actions, and which of those narratives they find most beautiful to manifest.

Cognitively demanding as it might be, I think the reward outweighs the cost, especially in important situations like politics. It will be assumed here that people do not lie, for this is a different issue treated in the next chapter.

First Clarification

If someone is able to reveal their moral in this way, then it becomes clear that they are reasoning morally. So, revealing the moral solves the first ambiguity problem. Revealing the moral means that one provides the full context, including the situation in which their moral is grounded, regardless of the validity of that belief.

So, if the proponents of the transgender positions are able to reveal their morals, then accusations of sheer amorality lose their force. I think we already live in a time of widespread moral reasoning, meaning we can also expect them to reveal their morals. See next section for more details. Otherwise, assume they do and their revealed morals are what is illustrated in the figures 4 and 5. This allows us to move to the second clarification.

Second Clarification

If two parties who disagree both reveal their morals, one can immediately see whether their understanding of the situation differs. This helps solve the second ambiguity problem, because it clarifies whether the disagreement is due to a misunderstanding or to a deeper conflict.

This can be seen directly by comparing the morals of position one and two. Their understanding of what a gender is differs. One considers it real, the other considers it fake. Two people who both reason morally, and who both wish to manifest the most beautiful story, can still have such a disagreement, which is rooted in a misunderstanding of each other.

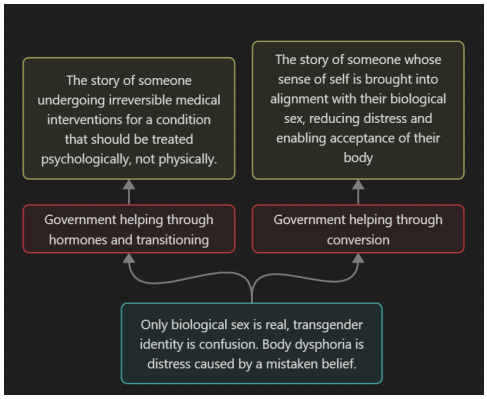

Figure 4: Moral revealment of position one in gender debate.

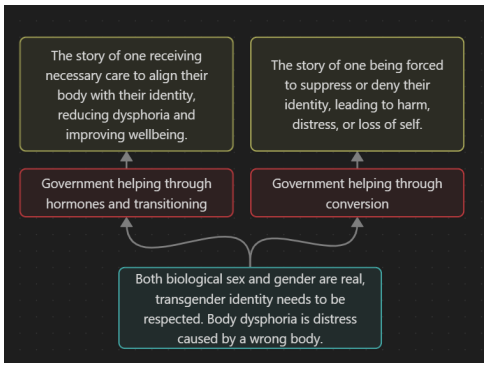

Figure 5: Moral revealment of position two in gender debate.

Third Clarification

Once assumptions have been made explicit, they can be challenged. One can ask how someone justifies their position and whether one dares to doubt it, to test it, to play devil's advocate against it, and to reconsider the evidence. This then clarifies whether said person engages in wishful thinking or not.

To use *honest* reasons to believe in a situation then means that ones belief is *doubt-independent*. This means that the reason one believes a situation is not that one is protecting it from doubt, but that after doubting it, reweighing the evidence, and considering alternatives, one returns to it. This solves the third ambiguity problem for it shows what it means to be honest with oneself and not to engage in wishful thinking. The relation of doubt independent beliefs and truth is explored more in the consolation section.

It is often when people of both camps start to doubt their position, and when they start to pool their evidence, that they reach the same conclusion. This convergence can be further argued for via the Bayesian Brain Hypothesis, discussed in the last section of this chapter. Here, the transgender debate will be continued by discussing a third position that can reconcile between the two positions discussed above, and might be attained by letting go.

However, the point here is not to solve disagreements, but to separate the real ones from the ones based on misunderstanding. There can be still real ones, and a possibility argued next chapter is that all real disagreements reduce to risk disagreements.

To conclude, moral revealment can help clarify the three ambiguities that repeatedly trouble public and political life. That is the first power of the moral: *clarification*.

Confrontation

This section turns to the second power of the moral: confrontation. Once the moral is made explicit, people can no longer hide so easily behind vague self-images of being obviously moral or automatically honest. The confrontation works by making this gap visible.

First, the general mechanism is discussed, and then, it is discussed how much confrontation one should expect.

Moral and Honest Looping Effect

Most people would prefer to see themselves as using moral and honest reasoning, especially in important situations. However, it might be the case that in actuality, they do not do so.

Asking people to reveal their moral confronts their pride because then the clarification will make clear whether their self-image is based on a lie or not. To avoid this outcome, their own pride pushes them to use honest and moral reasoning, especially in important situations.

This is what the looping effect means here. Even if the current distribution of genuinely honest and moral reasoning is not yet favorable, making moral revealment a norm creates pressure in that direction. The consolation power specifically creates more pressure to honest reasoning for it stops wishful thinking. Once clarification is public, the pride of the dishonest and amoral can become our ally rather than an obstacle.

Moral Reasoning

Implicit Morality

I believe we currently live in a time of implicit morality. This means that moral reasoning is widespread, meaning we currently live in a time of morality, but it still happens implicitly. The moral is still hidden in our discussions, not revealed. The result of implicit morality is that one expects less needed confrontation to make people reason morally.

The ambiguity problems discussed above are symptoms of implicit morality. People reason morally, but they do not yet explicitly reveal the structure of the moral they are following. For that reason, it remains hard to separate genuine moral disagreement from misunderstanding, and hard to distinguish honest commitment from the holding-fast of identity.

How we came to widespread (implicit) moral reasoning is an interesting discussion which allows a theological reading, pursued in later chapters. However, there is a case to be made that right now we are at a point in human history that we can truly wager the moral turn, the switch from implicit to explicit morality. I think it is time.

Political Morals

To demonstrate that moral reasoning is widespread, consider how moral reasoning can explain political movements. In public life, people often face a choice between supporting and resisting some change to the status quo, and can do so while following morals. Based on their understanding of the societal change, either a progression or an anti-regression moral grows from their belief, see 6.

The progression moral is the story of progressives fighting for progression, and the anti-regression moral is the story of conservatives protecting against regression. Often, the progression moral is an anti-oppression moral, the story of people fighting against the oppressors, and the regression moral is an anti-degeneracy moral, the story of people protecting themselves against degeneracy (Graham et al., 2009; Miles and Vaisey, 2015).

widespread moral reasoning would mean that most political activistic groups use moral reasoning, and not amoral - *us vs them* - reasoning. For example, anti immigration groups use anti degeneracy morals, black lives matter groups use anti oppression morals.

The same analysis holds for the transgender debate. One can understand the transgenders as perverse and degenerate, and therefore having the moral need to protect society from them. Another can understand the transgenders as being oppressed, and have the moral need to fight against the oppressors for them.

The commonality between the progression and anti-regression moral is the anti-corruption moral. The hearts of the oppressors or degenerates/perverse are corrupt and this corruption needs to disappear. The danger comes when one thinks the corruption can only disappear through lethal means, and one starts to identify oneself with this moral. See moral banners next subsection.

Honest Reasoning

Although we might live in a time of widespread moral reasoning, arguably we also live in a time of widespread wishful thinking because our existential need for direction is not yet properly dealt with.

First, our existential need for direction is discussed, and then how this leads to moral banners.

Existential need for direction

Although we might live in a time of widespread moral reasoning, there are reasons to be less optimistic about widespread honest reasons, meaning that wishfull thinking is currently still prevalent. The explanation offered here is that our existential need for direction is not yet properly addressed.

Certain beliefs provide direction by the stories they allow, for example, consider how morals are stories also grounded in a certain belief. The existential need for direction leads to the fear of losing these beliefs that provide direction, regardless of their specific content. Once people find a direction that lets them tell themselves that they are going the right way, letting go becomes difficult. These then become wishful thinkers.

This need for direction is not limited to politics. Love gives the feeling that spending time with your loved one, and working towards that future, is the right direction. Ambition gives the feeling that the project you are working on right now, and the future it promises, is the right direction. So can a worldview, a community, or a cause. When reality forces us to let go of these beliefs, regardless of our efforts to protect them, it can feel as though the world declares us bankrupt. We are destabilized, and we fear that we may never again find meaningful direction.

The existential need for direction also has a more literal and stronger interpretation, see poem last part of this book. Furthermore, our existential need for direction also has a more eastern interpretation. The self can be seen as ones understanding of the situation. Our fear of letting go leads to a grip on self, which one calls the ego. This makes the self rigid. It is only through the death of ego that ones self can become fluid once more.

Moral Banners and Hordes

Morals also provide direction, especially political morals. Protest, activism, and the pursuit of a better society can all give the feeling that one is moving rightly. But when the need for direction makes one afraid to doubt the beliefs on which a moral rests, the moral becomes a *moral banner*. One now identifies with the moral and it has become internalized.

In simpler terms, a moral banner is a moral held *firm* and not *loosely*. The person no longer merely follows the moral; they are invested in protecting it. This fits what the literature on moral conviction, motivated reasoning, and political compromise would lead us to expect: moralized attitudes can become identity-laden, resistant to compromise, and harder to revise in light of contrary evidence (Kahan, 2013; Skitka et al., 2021; Ryan, 2017).

The need for direction is often reinforced by a need for belonging. When many people hold the same moral banner together, a *moral horde* forms. Shared purpose strengthens conviction, but often at the expense of nuance, because collective organization favors simplified signals over articulated contexts. They bad, we good.

Amoral banners and hordes also exist, of course. One can think of hooliganism or fascism as more openly tribal forms of *us versus them* reasoning. But the more common danger, I think, is subtler: many activists on opposing sides may genuinely be following morals, yet still hold those morals so firmly that alignment becomes impossible. That is one reason why moral disagreement can persist even when both parties sincerely aim at what they take to be the good. See 7 for an illustration. These persisting moral disagreements are also a symptom of implicit morality, because the hidden moral also hides their assumptions, which saves them from confrontation.

One of the most dangerous forms of this is the lethal anti-corruption banner, for what horror to realize that the monster you were always hoping to fight, was yourself after all. That they did not laugh at you, but were actually scared of you. The question, then, is whether we can really ask people to let go, even in these cases. The next section argues that we can, but only because the moral also has a consoling power.

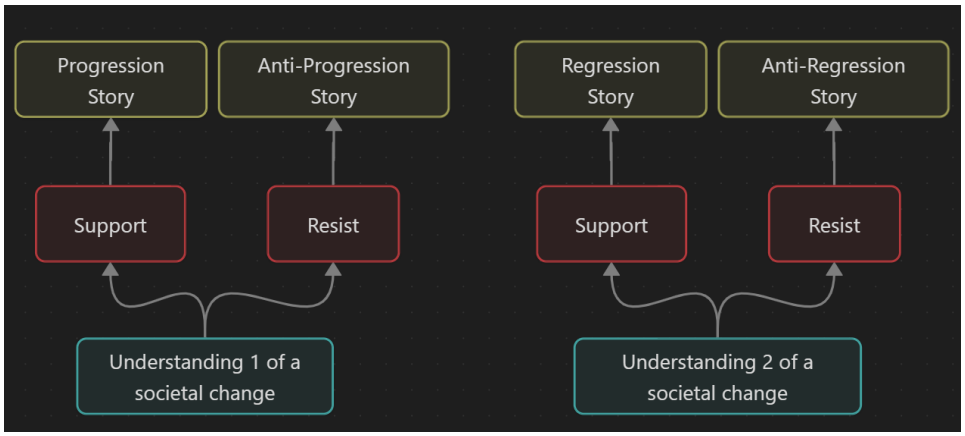

Figure 6: Progression and Anti-Regression Morals. The progressive moral is the story of progressives fighting for progression, and the anti- regression moral is the story of conservatives protecting against regression.

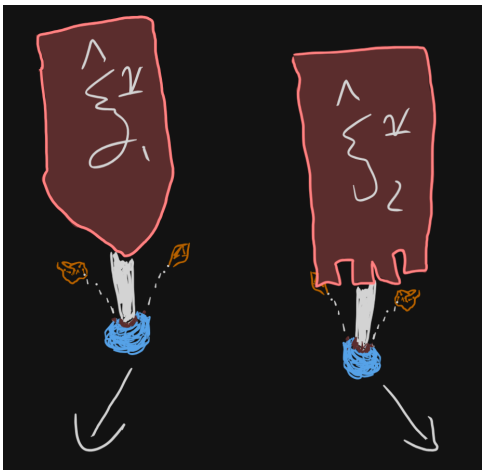

Figure 7: Two moral banners at the same choice moment wanting to go a different direction. The different blue balls refer to the two different understandings of the situation, which is balled up because of ego. The orange leaves refer to stories one can tell through possible actions that are non-best for the author. The banner is the moral.

Consolation

The third power of the moral is consolation. If clarification makes disagreement more visible, and confrontation makes self-deception harder, then consolation is what makes honesty bearable. This section first explains what I mean by letting go, and then argues that the moral still leaves us with a minimal form of direction.

Letting go and stranding

To let go is to stop caring which answer wins and to care instead only about what the evidence supports. That is, we start an *honest investigation* of the world that is devoid of any wishful thinking. Here, one is only interested in answering the question and not finding a certain answer.

During such an investigation, one entertains alternative hypotheses and moves across what we may call a landscape of possible beliefs. This is the *tumbling*. In an eastern interpretation, this is what happens when the self is fluid.

The honest investigation terminates when the current beliefs become *doubt-independent*. That is, doubting does not change once beliefs. When you let go of these beliefs, and start the honest investigation, you once more return to these beliefs. So these beliefs *return* when you let go. That is where one *strands*. Tumbling and stranding can be illustrated, see 8.

This termination condition is also the best evidence a scientist can have that their ideas are truth tracking. It is only by doubting, and starting the tumble, that one can make their beliefs respect the world. This is because a true model of the world always returns eventually when you let go. So, the hope is that, if your beliefs also return, we are as close to the truth as we possible can be. It has its flaws, but only holding beliefs that return is the best we can do.

Letting go also means to let go of the moral that was grounded in that belief. That belief gave us direction, so can we expect people to give up this belief given their existential need? The next subsection explores the consolation power of the moral, but first a slightly more formal reading of what happens when one lets go.

A MORE FORMAL READING:

At a formal level, one can redescribe this picture in broadly Bayesian terms. Predictive-processing and active-inference approaches model organisms as systems that must remain within viable bounds while inferring the hidden causes of their sensory input (Friston, 2010; Clark, 2013; Pezzulo et al., 2024). On such views, brains maintain generative models of the world and update those models in light of incoming evidence.

By evolution, our brains only goal was to maintain homeostasis, like

keeping our temperature, blood sugar and other values within viable bounds, called *meta-sensoric preferences*. But our brain now also seems able to have a preference beyond our homeostatic needs; the kind of beliefs one has, a kind of *meta-cognitive preference*. Especially beliefs that have proven to be action guiding - serving our need for direction - seem to be favored as a preference, this is wishfull thinking. This switch from meta sensoric to also meta cognitive preferences can be attributed to the recruitment of will, see third part of book for more details.

The result of these meta cognitive preferences is that the brains imperative is no longer to infer the states of the world, but also to maintain a belief. In eastern interpretation, this is the grip on self, called ego. This meta-cognitive preference changes the location of local wells in the free energy landscape, so that it affects which beliefs we hold.

To let go is to remove this meta-cognitive preference which unsettles us from these local wells. This means that now once more the brain pursues inference of the world without any wishfull thinking. So, it starts updating the model using the new observations, until the beliefs settle in a new position. In Free Energy terms, the beliefs start rolling down the free energy landscape until it settles into a new well, but this one not based on meta-cognitive preferences.

To let go, in these terms, is to relax that higher-order grip. The model is then allowed to update more freely in response to evidence. Where one strands is not random, because cognition remains coupled to the world it is trying to model. Again, this does not make the outcome infallible. But it does explain why the honest path is, in principle, more world-respecting than the defended one.

This is why morals carry at least as much objectivity as the beliefs that ground them. A moral can be wrong in roughly the same sense that an underlying belief can be wrong. However, morals have another source of subjectivity; the authors valuation, which can be approached via the inter and intra personal variations, see next chapter.

Minimal Direction

The moral can console our existential need for direction, because no matter where we strand after letting go, we can always grow a moral anew. For this reason, we can expect of people to only hold morals that return, which is the *minimal direction*, see 9.

It is called minimal because it assumes only that one can adopt the authors valuation, and it assumes not the validity of religious meta-physics, like what happens after death and so on. The minimal direction can always be found, however, what is found, must be held loosely, meaning that it can also always be lost.

This means that the path of minimal direction is a path of a constant

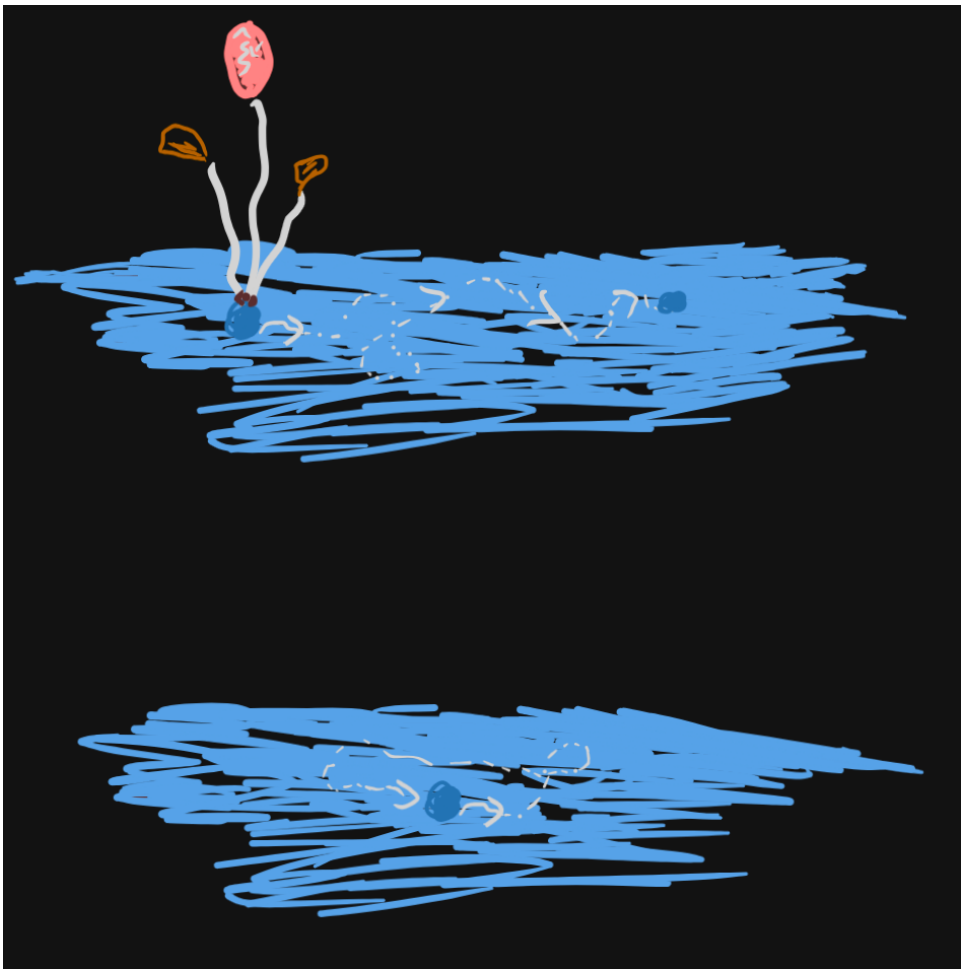

Figure 8: Above: letting go of a moral, and tumbling. Below: the beliefs stranding because these are doubt independent.

reinvention. Death of ego, followed by a rebirth through beauty. To not only bloom where one is planted, but to also critically ask where one *is* planted. One can understand the good thing as that which respects both beauty and truth, and following the moral that returns fits exactly this description.

Taking consolation in the minimal direction also allows a shift in attitude towards doubt. While in implicit morality, doubt is seen as a sign of weakness, in explicit morality, it can be seen as a sign of strength. This changes what virtues of a politician society will accept, explained more next section.

The minimal direction applies more broadly than morality alone. Beliefs grounding stories of love, ambition, and status can also be held either firm or loosely. If one takes true consolation in the moral that returns, one has nothing to fear, for one is already saved.

This is the deeper consolation. We can ask people to let go, not because direction does not matter, but because direction is recoverable. The minimal demand is not that one never lose a moral, but that one only hold those morals that return.

The Buckriders from the book: 'Eir last wish' have the following interpretation of minimal direction. See 10 for an illustration. One can see the moral in a banner or in a torch. The moral in a banner is static, because the moral is held firm. The moral in the torch is dynamic, because the moral is held loosely and does not always return, meaning a new moral must be grown where one strands. The torch is fed by doubt, and if this flame dies, the torch becomes a banner again. To wield a torch is to only hold morals that return.

This licenses the following interpretation about the warning of about the lethal anti-corruption banner. Those who take up the torch against corruption, risk corruption themselves the most. For these, the torch feels cold for impatience kills the flame of doubt. This therefore necessitates extra vigilance.

A new politics

If clarification, confrontation, and consolation are combined, they suggest a different way of imagining public life, one where doubt is not seen as a sign of weakness, rather, a sign of strength. This final section sketches that possibility.

Moral Alignment by Letting Go

Moral alignment by letting go may be the most favorable form of alignment in important situations, especially in politics.

For this to happen during a moral disagreement, both parties have to let go, which we can demand under the morals consolation. Then, given

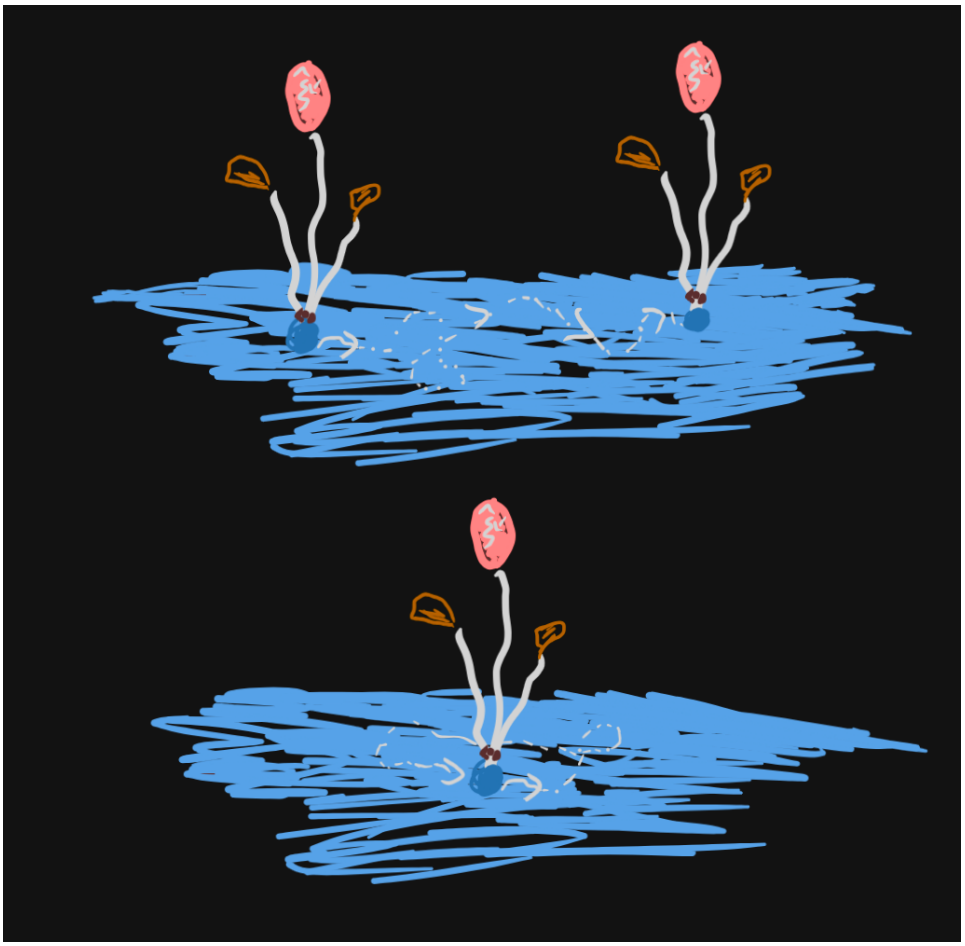

Figure 9: Above: wherever we strand, we can always grow a moral anew. Below: that is why we can expect of one to only hold morals that return, the minimal direction.

that both parties share the same world, we can expect that their paths will converge, so that they may strand on the same location (Lees and Cikara, 2021; Jong, 2024; Fishkin et al., 2021). This is what moral alignment by letting go means, see 11.

However, stranding at the same belief does not mean that both parties grow the same moral. Another dominant explanation of moral disagreements is that of risk aversion differences. However, believing this is the situation can also grow a moral, how best to solve *these* moral disagreements? The hope that *this* choice moment *can* find moral alignment by letting go.

The next subsection argues that the moral map is the best way to foster moral alignments, especially within politics. But first, we return to the transgender debate to show an example of a possible moral alignment by letting go.

POLITICAL EXAMPLE CONTINUED

A concrete example of moral alignment by letting go is by considering the positions on the transgender debate. I do this by discussing my own view which was the result of letting go for me, whilst taking science and my own experience seriously. For more details, see next chapter.

My understanding of the situation is as follows: gender refers to something real, but body dysphoria can be unlearned. More specifically, gender refers to a motivation subsystem from sexual selection, just like sexual orientation does. And just like sexual orientation, evidence suggest that an atypical motivation subsystem is determined in the womb where the brain starts developing and this cannot be changed.

Body dysphoria is not the result of this atypical motivational subsystem, rather it is the result of societal friction, which *is* learned. This is because transfolk try to explain their societal friction by seeing their body as the problem, resulting them in seeing their own body as evidence they cannot be who they want to be. But this can be unlearned. For further details, see end of this part.

Then, if someone believes this is the case, one can now ask what is the most beautiful story to tell for the transfolks. This results in the following moral, see 12.

Moral Map

The *moral map* is argued to best harness the clarification power of the moral and consequently promote moral alignments by letting go. The map shows how different morals, and the beliefs that ground them, relate to one another.

In the moral map, every moral can be placed on the map based on its belief. If one can add their moral to the moral map, it is shown that they reason morally. This solves the first ambiguity problem. These morals can be pooled together, which can be illustrated as one big map consisting of morals of the form we discussed earlier; 3. This results in the moral map, see 13,

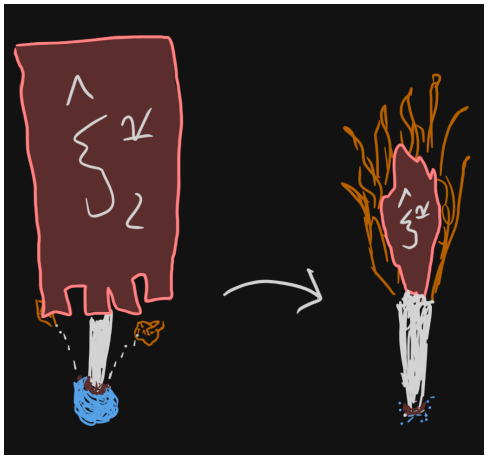

Figure 10: Buckrider interpretation of the minimal direction. The torch is fed by doubt.

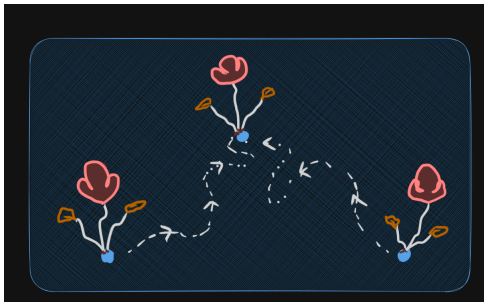

Figure 11: Moral alignment by letting go.

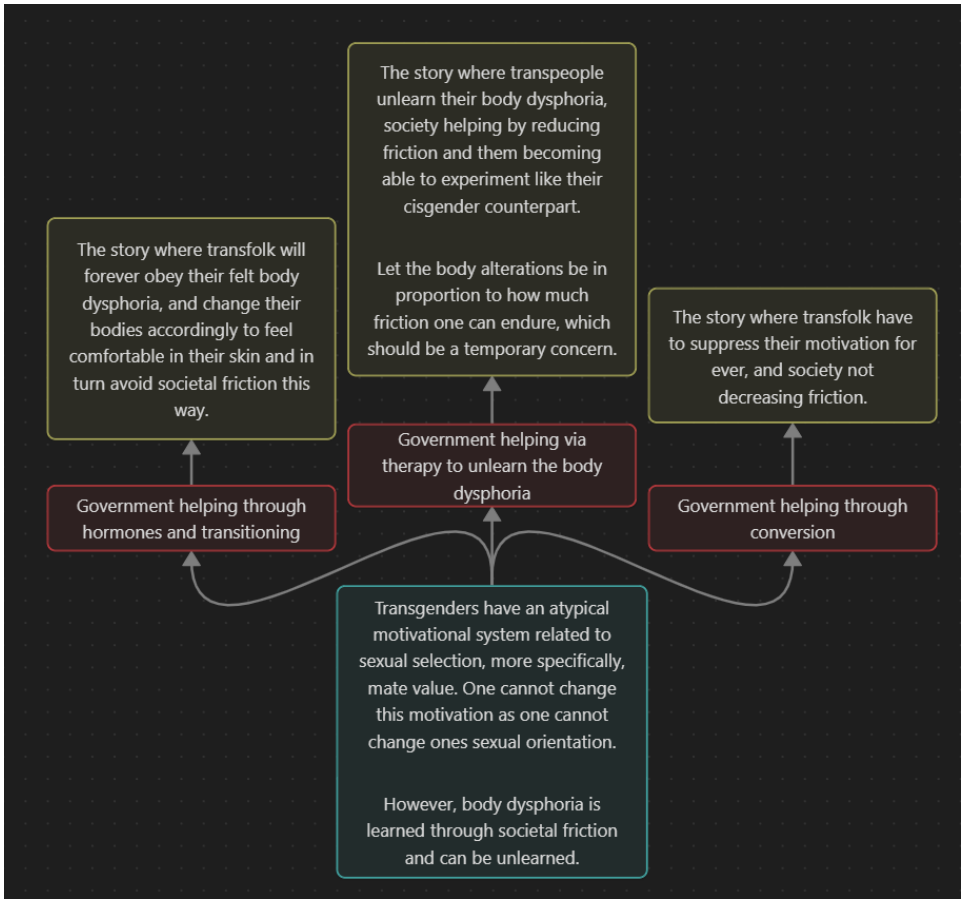

Figure 12: Moral of position three in the gender debate.

which can be seen in full in the appendix of the book. The parametrization and specification boxes are explained at the end of this subsubsection.

These beliefs can be grouped. The first grouping is the choice-beliefs, which are all beliefs which can grow a moral relevant to the choice moment. For example, all understandings of the transgender situation that are relevant to make a choice regarding transcare. If people during a choice moment plant their morals in different places, but within the same choice-beliefs, then it is immediately clear that the moral disagreement is due to a misunderstanding; they understand the world differently. This solves the second ambiguity problem.

Then, once their morals have been revealed, a scientific transparent debate can pursue regarding where one is actually planted in that choice moment. The beliefs can be subject to full scrutiny and it becomes harder to hide wishful thinking. This solves the third ambiguity problem.

Another, more high level, way of grouping beliefs is that of regions. For example, all choice moments regarding our social life, or how we interact with the environment and so on. See the moral map for a few examples. This extra organization allows for regional experts of the moral map, crucial if the moral map need become a global effort.

There is a special idiosyncratic region on the moral map, that of our personal life. Here, the stories one must manifest are about the kind of person we want to be, the kind of lifestory we wish to tell ourselves. It is a region that is most intimate for us and often remains private, but it may be the place where the moral matters most deeply. [1]

PARAMETERIZATION AND SPECIFICATION

Because the actual belief referred to by linguistic symbols must still be inferred, there is always risk of intention–interpretation mismatch. One person's interpretation of a description may fail to match another person's intended meaning. To solve this issue, one must ask clarifying questions about the situation at hand and see if their answer align.

To facilitate this clarification, the moral map also hosts purple parameterization boxes that show the possible situations that the blue box could refer to, and then green boxes that specify a possibility. For each green specified belief, one can again grow a moral, but now with less vagueness in communication.

Political Implementations

The moral map could, in principle, be used within almost any political system. Here, the focus is on democracy.

[1] In a theological reading, one can identify oneself not with the author, giving them company in their darkest moments.

First, it could be used inside representative democracy by making moral revealment a common part of public debate. Politicians and parties would be expected not merely to announce positions, but to reveal the situations they believe they are in, the possible stories they think different actions would realize, and the story they take to be best.

Second, political manifestos could be translated onto the moral map. That would allow more systematic investigation of how different parties' morals and assumptions relate. It would also create a more transparent interface with science, because empirical claims could be examined more directly and disagreements about facts could be separated from disagreements about morals.

Third, the moral map suggests a more issue-specific and potentially more direct democracy. If a major choice moment arises, the relevant region of the map could be publicly developed. Scientific parties or institutions would debate the descriptive question of what the situation actually is; political parties and citizens would debate the moral question of what ought to be done, given that situation. After this transparent battle is over and the deadline is near, the citizens are able to vote in a way that remedies (some of) their ingroup outgroup biases.

Effectively, the moral map promotes the scientist determining the place through dialectics, and the politician determining the moral that grows there, through rhetorics.

Finally, one can imagine a global moral map, collaboratively developed across countries, to improve cooperation on shared problems. Experts can specialize in different regions with full transparency. The hope is that this will improve global cooperation for the issues we face as a world today.

This moral map is currently being tested and used in practice by Compos Mentis and T-Maakt, associations based in Tilburg and Breda in the Netherlands. See Compos Mentis and T-Maakt for more details.

Conclusion

What does it mean to reason morally, and how can that understanding help society? This chapter has offered a reader-friendly overview of what I call the power of the moral. I argued that moral reasoning is best understood as reasoning from the perspective of the author, in line with the intuition of the *moral of the story*. A moral is then a reason for the author to act.

From that understanding follow three forms of power. The first is *clarification*: the moral helps address amorality accusations, disagreements rooted in misunderstanding, and unchallenged assumptions. The second is *confrontation*: by asking people to reveal their moral, it places pressure on the gap between their self-image and their actual reasoning. The third is *consolation*: it helps people remain honest by offering minimal direction even

after letting go.

My broader claim is that these three powers together can help societies face democratic stagnation, mistrust, and polarization. The chapter therefore ended by suggesting that the moral, organized through a moral map, may serve as a basis for a new politics.

Due to the superficial nature of this chapter, many questions are left unanswered. For example, the exact neurology of the authors valuation or the relation between the moral and other ideas. See next chapter for details, which follows a moral calculus. The full book (in progress) can be seen here: Consciousness, Conscience and the Calling Poem.

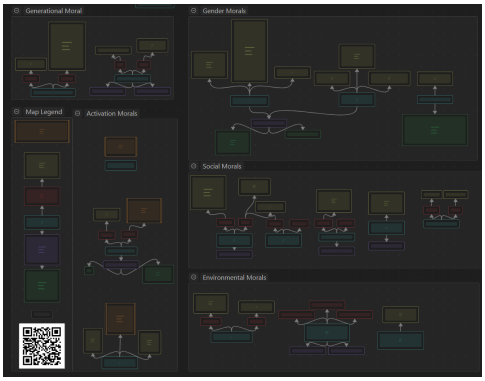

Figure 13: An example of the moral map, showing the social, environmental, gender and generational regions. For full map, see appendix.

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