

Stephen Stich, "Do We Really Externalize or Objectivize Moral Demands?"
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Abstract

Stanford's goal is to explain the uniquely human tendency to externalize or objectify "distinctively moral" demands, norms, and obligations. I maintain that there is no clear phenomenon to explain. Stanford's account of which norms are distinctively moral relies on Turiel's problematic work. Stanford's justification of the claim that we "objectify" moral demands ignores recent studies indicating that often we do not.

Stanford has offered an intriguing explanation of the uniquely human cross-cultural tendency to externalize or objectify "distinctively moral" demands, norms, and obligations. I am impressed by the ingenuity and sophistication of the explanation. But I am less impressed by the explanandum. To put my concern rather bluntly, I am not convinced there is anything to explain.

Let me start with "distinctively moral" – an expression that occurs 15 times in Stanford's article, modifying (among other things) "norm(s)," "transgressions," "obligation(s)," and "commitments." Which norms, transgressions, obligations, and commitments are distinctively moral? For the last half of the twentieth century, this was a *hot* topic in philosophy. Indeed, according to Alistair MacIntyre, writing in 1957, "[t]he central task to which moral philosophers have addressed themselves is that of listing the distinctive characteristics of moral utterances" (MacIntyre [1957](#), p. 325). But that project made very little headway. Though lots of accounts were offered, none gained wide acceptance. During the last two decades, discussions of how to distinguish moral norms, judgments, and transgressions from their non-moral counterparts have largely disappeared from the philosophical literature. Despite trying very hard for half a century, philosophers have been unable to tell us which norms (etc.) are distinctively moral. (For details and references, see Stich, [forthcoming](#).)

So why does Stanford think that there *is* a distinctively moral class of norms, demands, and obligations, and which norms (etc.) are they? The answer, it appears, relies heavily on the work of Elliot Turiel and his associates. While philosophers were still actively debating the appropriate definition of morality, Turiel dipped into the philosophical literature, borrowed a few of the items that had been proposed as distinctive features of moral judgments and norms, added a few ideas of his own, and used these to construct a test – the moral/conventional task – that, he maintained, would tell us whether a person's normative judgment was a moral judgment or a conventional judgment. The moral judgments are the ones that a person takes to be authority independent, will generalize in time and space (if it is wrong here and now, it is also wrong at all other locations and at all other times), and will justify by appeal to harm, justice, or rights. There is, however, something rather puzzling about this. Why are *these* features the ones that characterize judgments that are distinctively moral? The puzzle is underscored when we

note that in Turiel's account many norms that that have traditionally been taken to be prototypically moral (norms prohibiting masturbation, for example, or norms prohibiting blasphemy) are not moral norms at all.

One way of responding to this puzzle is to suggest that the features that Turiel specifies pick out a psychological natural kind of norms, and that it is appropriate to consider these to be the *moral* norms because the members of this class include many norms that would intuitively be classified as moral. This idea was first proposed by Kelly et al. (2007) and is elaborated in Kumar (2015) and Stich (forthcoming). But for this response to be workable, the features have to be a “nomological cluster” with a strong tendency to all be present or all be absent, and there is now a long list of studies finding that the features don't cluster in this way. In response, one might add and drop features to the set that putatively characterizes the moral natural kind. There is some suggestion that Stanford is inclined to explore this option since he suggests that we should not consider being concerned with “harm, fairness, justice rights, or welfare” to be a “defining feature of moral norms” (sect. 2, para. 2). And, in contrast with Turiel and his followers, he apparently takes “seriousness” to be a defining feature. But on my reading of the evidence, there is little reason to believe that this set of features is a nomological cluster either. So I am left wondering what, exactly, Stanford has in mind when he talks of “distinctively moral” norms and why he thinks those norms really are distinctively moral.

Let us turn, now, to the tendency to externalize or objectify distinctively moral norms. What does this come to? Sometimes Stanford relies on the language of phenomenology: “[we] experience the demands of morality as somehow *imposed* on us externally” and “we regard such demands as imposing unconditional obligations not only on ourselves, but also on any and all agents whatsoever” (sect. 1, para. 2, emphasis in target article). Well, perhaps Stanford experiences the demands of morality in this way. But I don't recognize this as part of *my* moral phenomenology. Which one of us is an outlier? Stanford maintains that the work of Goodwin and Darley indicates that most people share something like his moral phenomenology. These researchers found that when participants were asked questions designed to determine whether they thought that ethical beliefs are objectively true or false, “ethical beliefs were treated almost as objectively as scientific or factual beliefs” (Goodwin & Darley 2008, p. 1359, quoted in Stanford target article, sect. 2, para. 4). Stanford notes, and attempts to accommodate, the work of Sarkissian et al. (2011), which seems to indicate that ordinary folk are much less objectivist than Goodwin and Darley suggest. But the Sarkissian et al. paper is just the first of a recent cascade of papers, all of which cast doubt on the conclusion that people are consistently objectivist about moral judgments (Beebe 2014; 2015; Beebe & Sackris 2016; Quintelier et al. 2014; for a review, see Sarkissian 2016). Moreover, even if we put these recent studies aside, there is a disconnect between the Goodwin and Darley findings and the account of “distinctively moral” norms proposed by Turiel. Neither the Goodwin and Darley studies nor other studies exploring moral objectivism make any effort to show that the moral judgments they focus on would pass Turiel's test, or anything like it. The assumption that the moral judgments that are the focus of Goodwin and Darley–style studies are “distinctively moral” (as Stanford apparently uses this term) is purely speculative. (For more on this issue, see section 3 in Stich, forthcoming.)

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