MORAL NORMS

PRELIMINARY MATTERS: MORAL NORMS

What are moral norms?

What purposes do they serve?

What are the sources of authority of norms?

Etyonym

Latin *norma*
- a carpenter's square for measuring right angles
- a pattern, rule, standard.

Latin *normalis*
- made according to a square
- right, regular

WHAT IS A MORAL NORM?

*A moral norm is an indication how humans **ought** to exercise their freedom.*

- Moral norms point us toward achievable **ideals**
    - *Like the carpenter's square, an ideal serves as a standard to measure what is actually done.*

- Ideal ⟶ Actual

    measures

- Morally normative ≠ normal or typical

Moral Norms Have Different Forms

* Moral norms can be expressed as rules, principles, dispositiions, character traits, and even through the life of the person. These are different ways of specifying criteria for moral judgments.

* The life and person of Jesus Christ is the central and most complete Christian moral norm.

The Form of a Moral Norm should fit what it measures.

- **Aristotle's Flexible Leaden Ruler**
  - A sense of equity (fairness) is needed to adjust laws to cases that don't fit neatly into the intent of the law.

  - Aristotle compares this equity to the flexible leaden ruler used by builders in the Greek island of Lesbos. When building temples with heavy stones they would:
    - Start with a stone already in place
    - Take this flexible strip of lead metal and bend it to follow the irregular shape of this particular stone
    - Measure other potential stones to find the best fit

The Form of a Moral Norm should fit what it measures.

Example: Your mother has a heart attack. To save her life every second counts. You exceed the posted speed limit of 35 m.p.h. in Route to the hospital. Is it fair to hold you to the speed limit law?
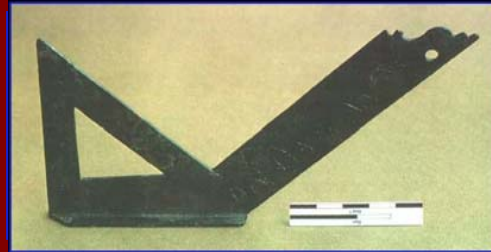
A Fitting Moral Norm

A rigid carpenter's square is a poor instrument to measure the shape of a round stone. In contrast, a Lesbian ruler adjusts so as to conform to the uniqueness of the stone that it measures.

- ✓ A person who attempts to make every decision by an inflexible, rigid *a priori* principle (i.e. fully determined in advance), is like an architect who uses a straight edge to measure the intricate curves of a fluted column.

- ✓ He becomes legalistic.

- ✓ Prudent moral judgment requires norms that *fit* the circumstances that they measure.

- **Carpenter's Square**

  – Moral norms are like the carpenter's square used to measure human freedom and construct morally good character and right actions. Moral norms are **standards** or **criteria** for judging and acting

  – PURPOSES

    a) *Provide moral standards, criteria, or measures for judging.*

    b) *Guide conscience in making moral judgments.*

- **Moral Road Signs**

  – Guides to being and doing; indications or **directions** to *types* of actions that right v. wrong, obligatory v. permitted

  – PURPOSES
    a) *Preserve and protect moral goods and values by guiding us*
    b) *Focus our attention on what is morally important*

- **A model for an art class**

    - **ideals** indicating who we "ought" to become and what we ought to do
    -- **Models** and **patterns** for how to do so
    - PURPOSES
        a) *Provide models* to help us concretize our values and realize our ideals
        b) *Prioritize our values* and help us to fit them with our circumstances

- **An architect's blueprints for a building**

  QuickTime™ and a
  Photo - JPEG decompressor
  are needed to see this picture.

  – A set of **instructions** and **expectations** for the moral life

  – PURPOSES
    a) *Teach moral wisdom of a community and serve as moral reminders of communal wisdom.*
    b) *Set moral expectations that shape how we see and act.*

THE SOURCES OF CHRISTIAN MORAL NORMS

- **Scripture** - ex. Thou shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. Love your enemies.

- **Reason** (includes natural law) - ex. Self-preservation: it is reasonable to expect people to defend their lives when threatened.

- **Tradition** - ex. Just War Doctrine

- **Experience** - ex. Hiroshima and Nagasaki suggest that a nuclear war cannot target only combatants.

Three Main Types of Moral Norms

Material Norms

Formal Norms

Synthetic Norms

MATERIAL NORMS

a) Specify the "matter" or means of specific actions

b) Answer the question "WHAT should (or should not) be done?"

c) Focus on DOING and tend to indicate actions

d) Ex. Intentionally targeting and killing noncombatants is wrong

Formal Norms

a) Specify the "form" of acting and especially the form of being

b) Answer the question "HOW should (or shouldn't) one act?" or "WHO should (or shouldn't) one be?

c) Focus more on BEING and tend to indicate character traits or dispositions

d) Ex. Beatitudes: "Blessed are the peacemakers."

Synthetic Norms

a) Combine description of an action with moral evaluation of the action

b) Combine description of WHAT is done with HOW it is done and/or WHY

c) Focus on both

d) Ex. "Thou shall not murder"