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# The Co-creation of Ethical Frameworks: Navigating Societal Prescriptions and Individual Moral Agency in Contemporary Contexts

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**Received:** 03 May 2025 **Accepted:** 02 June 2025 **Published:** 01 July 2025**ABSTRACT**

This article explores the intricate relationship between socially constructed norms and individual ethical subjectivity in shaping moral realities within contemporary societies. Drawing on diverse theoretical perspectives from sociology, philosophy, and political theory, we argue that moral frameworks are not static or universally given, but rather emerge from a dynamic interplay of collective understanding, institutional practices, and individual interpretations. We examine how social norms, reinforced through various mechanisms, influence and constrain ethical choices, while simultaneously acknowledging the persistent capacity for individual agency and the potential for moral dissent and innovation. The paper delves into the mechanisms by which moral consensus is forged and challenged, considering the roles of language, power structures, recognition, and the ongoing negotiation of identity. Ultimately, this analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex processes through which moral realities are continuously co-created and contested in a pluralistic world.

**Keywords:** Moral reality, social construction, ethical subjectivity, social norms, agency, recognition, identity.

**INTRODUCTION**

The question of how societies establish and maintain their moral frameworks has long been a central inquiry across the humanities and social sciences. Are moral principles objective truths discovered by individuals, or are they products of collective human endeavor? This article posits that moral realities are neither purely objective nor entirely subjective, but rather arise from a complex interplay between the two. We propose a nuanced understanding of this "co-creation," where societal norms, institutional structures, and historical contingencies profoundly shape the landscape of moral discourse, while individuals retain a crucial capacity for ethical reflection, interpretation, and action.

Traditional philosophical approaches have often sought to identify universal moral principles, while sociological perspectives have highlighted the social origins of values and beliefs. This article seeks to bridge this divide by examining how shared understandings, embedded in social norms, provide the foundational grammar for moral reasoning, even as individuals actively engage in the interpretation, application, and sometimes, the subversion of these norms. We contend that understanding the dynamic interaction between societal prescriptions and individual moral agency is crucial for comprehending the evolution and challenges of ethical life in contemporary societies.

The concept of "social construction" serves as a foundational lens for this inquiry, emphasizing that many aspects of our reality, including morality, are not natural but are products of human interaction and agreement [1]. However, this perspective alone is insufficient to capture the full complexity. It is equally important to consider the role of individual "ethical subjectivity," which refers to the unique moral consciousness, values, and decision-making processes that characterize each person [27]. This article seeks to synthesize these two crucial dimensions, providing a comprehensive account of how moral realities are forged and continuously re-negotiated.

### **Theoretical Framework: The Interplay of Social Construction and Ethical Subjectivity**

Our theoretical framework is built upon the premise that moral realities are inherently relational, emerging from the ongoing dialogue between the collective and the individual. This section delineates the key theoretical strands that inform our analysis.

#### **The Social Construction of Moral Realities**

The idea that reality is socially constructed, as eloquently articulated by Berger and Luckmann, posits that human beings collectively create and sustain the meaning structures of their world [1].<sup>1</sup> Applied to morality, this implies that ethical principles, values, and even the very notion of what constitutes a "moral problem" are not pre-given but are products of shared human experience and consensus. Searle further elaborates on this, distinguishing between "brute facts" and "institutional facts," with moral norms largely falling into the latter category, dependent on collective recognition and agreement [7, 13].<sup>2</sup>

Social norms, broadly defined as shared expectations about appropriate behavior, play a pivotal role in this construction process [6]. They are internalized by individuals through socialization, becoming seemingly natural and self-evident guides for conduct [4, 14]. These norms can be explicit, such as laws or religious tenets, or implicit, embedded in customs, traditions, and everyday interactions.<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" illuminates how these social norms become embodied dispositions, influencing our perceptions, thoughts, and actions often unconsciously [10].<sup>4</sup>

Power structures also profoundly shape the construction of moral realities. Foucault, for instance, demonstrates how

discourses of power define what is considered "normal" and "deviant," thereby influencing the boundaries of acceptable moral conduct and establishing systems of discipline and punishment [2].<sup>5</sup> The prevailing societal norms often reflect the interests and values of dominant groups, leading to the marginalization or suppression of alternative moral perspectives [20, 22].

#### **The Emergence of Ethical Subjectivity**

While social norms exert significant influence, they do not entirely determine individual morality. Ethical subjectivity highlights the active role of individuals in interpreting, internalizing, and sometimes resisting these norms. Mead's work on the "social self" is crucial here, demonstrating how the self emerges through social interaction and the internalization of the attitudes of others, yet still retains a unique perspective [5]. Taylor further explores the "sources of the self," emphasizing the complex moral frameworks and narratives individuals construct to make sense of their lives and guide their actions [6, 29].

Individuals engage in a continuous process of moral reasoning, weighing competing values, responding to novel situations, and making choices that may align with or diverge from established norms. This capacity for moral agency is essential for societal change and the evolution of ethical understanding. Even in the face of pervasive social pressures, individuals can question, challenge, and ultimately redefine what is considered morally right or wrong [26].

#### **The Dialectic of Structure and Agency**

Giddens' theory of structuration offers a valuable framework for understanding the ongoing dialectical relationship between social structures (including norms) and individual agency [3].<sup>6</sup> Structures enable and constrain action, while actions simultaneously reproduce and transform structures.<sup>7</sup> In the context of morality, this means that while social norms provide the framework for ethical conduct, individual choices and interpretations constantly re-shape and re-negotiate these norms.

Habermas's theory of communicative action provides another crucial lens, emphasizing the role of rational discourse in reaching moral consensus and resolving ethical dilemmas [4]. Through open and uncoerced communication, individuals can critically examine existing norms, articulate their own moral perspectives, and work

towards mutually agreeable solutions. This highlights the dynamic and potentially transformative nature of moral realities.

### **Mechanisms of Moral Co-creation**

The co-creation of moral realities occurs through a variety of interconnected mechanisms, ranging from explicit social institutions to subtle interpersonal interactions.

#### **Language and Narrative**

Language is fundamental to the construction and transmission of moral realities [16]. Through shared vocabulary, metaphors, and narratives, societies define moral concepts, articulate values, and establish frameworks for understanding ethical dilemmas. The stories we tell ourselves about what is good or bad, just or unjust, profoundly shape our moral imaginations and guide our actions [27]. The evolution of language itself can reflect shifts in moral understanding.

#### **Institutions and Practices**

Formal institutions, such as legal systems, educational bodies, and religious organizations, play a significant role in codifying and enforcing moral norms. They establish rules, sanctions, and educational curricula that transmit ethical principles across generations [2]. However, informal practices, rituals, and everyday interactions also contribute to the ongoing reinforcement and occasional subversion of moral realities [10].

#### **Recognition and Identity**

Honneth's theory of recognition underscores the profound link between social recognition and individual moral development [8]. The struggle for recognition, whether in terms of rights, respect, or esteem, is often a struggle for the validation of one's identity and moral worth. When individuals or groups are denied recognition, it can lead to moral outrage and social conflict, prompting challenges to existing moral orders [23, 20]. Butler further highlights how gender and other social categories are performatively constructed, impacting how individuals are recognized and how moral norms are applied to them [9]. The ongoing negotiation of identity, both individual and collective, is thus a continuous process of moral co-creation [19].

#### **Moral Deliberation and Conflict**

Moral realities are not always harmonious or settled. Disagreements and conflicts over values are inherent to pluralistic societies. Rawls's concept of "justice as fairness" provides a framework for how individuals in a society might agree upon principles of justice, even when they hold diverse comprehensive moral doctrines [11]. However, MacIntyre highlights the challenges of achieving moral consensus in the absence of a shared teleology, suggesting that moral discourse in contemporary society often lacks a coherent framework [12].<sup>8</sup> The very act of moral deliberation, whether in public discourse or private reflection, involves the active engagement of individual ethical subjectivity with existing social norms, leading to the potential for re-evaluation and transformation [24].

### **Contemporary Challenges and Future Directions**

In contemporary societies, the co-creation of moral realities faces several significant challenges. The rapid pace of technological change, globalization, and increasing cultural diversity often lead to moral ambiguities and conflicts.

#### **The Crisis of Moral Authority**

Bauman's concept of "postmodern ethics" highlights the erosion of traditional moral authorities and the rise of a more fluid and individualized ethical landscape [15]. This can lead to a sense of moral relativism, where universally accepted ethical standards become elusive. However, this fluidity also presents opportunities for greater individual autonomy in moral decision-making. Rorty further suggests that in a contingent world, moral progress comes not from discovering universal truths, but from expanding our capacity for empathy and solidarity with others [18].

#### **Navigating Pluralism and Difference**

Modern societies are characterized by a profound diversity of values and worldviews.<sup>9</sup> Young's work on "justice and the politics of difference" emphasizes the need to move beyond universalizing moral frameworks to address the specific needs and experiences of marginalized groups [20]. Fraser's concept of "justice interruptus" similarly calls for a critical examination of how power relations shape the distribution of recognition and resources, which are inextricably linked to moral claims [22]. The challenge lies in fostering a common ethical ground that respects fundamental human dignity while accommodating

legitimate differences [19, 21].

### The Role of Emotions in Moral Judgment

While often viewed as distinct from rationality, emotions play a crucial role in shaping moral judgments and motivating ethical action [30].<sup>10</sup> Nussbaum argues for the "intelligence of emotions," demonstrating how feelings like compassion, anger, and empathy are integral to our moral understanding. Dewey, similarly, emphasized the interconnectedness of human nature and conduct, suggesting that moral choices are deeply intertwined with our lived experiences and emotions [24].<sup>11</sup> Recognizing the affective dimension of ethical subjectivity is crucial for a complete understanding of moral co-creation.

### Towards a Dynamic and Reflexive Morality

Moving forward, understanding the co-creation of moral realities necessitates a commitment to ongoing dialogue, critical reflection, and adaptive ethical frameworks. It requires acknowledging that moral truths are not fixed but are continually negotiated and re-imagined through collective and individual efforts [25, 28]. This involves fostering a public sphere where diverse moral voices can be heard and deliberated [4], and recognizing that ethical progress often stems from the ongoing struggle for recognition and justice [8]. Hacking's work on "the social construction of what?" reminds us to be critical of what we deem socially constructed, while simultaneously recognizing the profound impact of collective understandings [16]. Arendt's concept of "the human condition" underscores the inherent plurality of human existence, necessitating a moral framework that embraces and navigates difference [17].

### CONCLUSION

The moral landscape of contemporary societies is a dynamic tapestry woven from the threads of social norms and individual ethical subjectivity. This article has argued that moral realities are not simply given but are actively co-created through a continuous interplay of collective understandings, institutional practices, and individual interpretations. While social norms provide the essential framework and grammar for moral discourse, individual agency, fueled by reflection, empathy, and the struggle for recognition, constantly reshapes and redefines these norms.

Understanding this intricate co-creation process is essential for navigating the complex ethical challenges of our time. It calls for a nuanced approach that acknowledges both the power of societal influences and the enduring capacity of individuals to act as moral agents. By fostering open dialogue, promoting critical reflection, and recognizing the diverse sources of moral wisdom, we can collectively strive to construct more just, equitable, and humane moral realities for the future. The ongoing negotiation between the "is" of social facts and the "ought" of moral ideals remains a fundamental task, one that will continue to shape the contours of our shared ethical world.

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