

# In Defense of Moral Realism: Reply to Gabennesch

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SHWEDER, RICHARD A. *In Defense of Moral Realism*. CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 1990, 61, 2060–2067. Moral realism is pervasive in everyday life, and the more of it the better. The moral realism of everyday life is not childlike egocentric realism, in Piaget's sense, nor is it, as Gabennesch argues, an avoidable or deplorable form of opacity, reification, or ethnocentrism. The social order is part of the moral order, yet natural moral law extends beyond issues of harm, rights, and justice. Turiel is a cognitivist who restricts his conception of natural moral law to harm, rights, and justice. Gabennesch is an emotivist or conventionalist who has no concept of natural moral law at all. I share with Turiel his cognitivism but not his restricted conception of natural law. I share with Gabennesch his reading of the evidence for a pervasive moral realism of everyday life, but not his conventionalist interpretation of it.

A lively sense of reality is a salutary thing, but it has to be proved and not merely felt that a Plato's sense of reality is inferior to the ploughboy's. [Ryle, 1930; p. 105]

## Cognitivism versus Emotivism in Moral Development Research

Eliot Turiel and I are both "cognitivists," in the philosophical sense of that term (see Kohlberg, 1981). Turiel is a cognitivist whose conception of natural moral law is relatively narrow. In Turiel's conception of natural moral law, harm, rights, and justice are the only genuine moral qualities. Given his conception of natural moral law, Turiel treats many customary obligations (e.g., the Hindu prohibition against addressing your father by first name) as "conventional" because they are devoid of justification by reference to harm, rights, and justice (see Turiel, Killen, & Helwig, 1988).

Turiel and I disagree about many things: about whether there is a single true natural moral law, or whether there are several; about whether natural law is epistemic (dependent on our conceptual choices); about whether moral law extends beyond issues of harm, rights, and justice. I subscribe to the view (and Turiel does not) that there is more than one true natural moral law, that natural law is "epistemic," and that moral law extends beyond issues of harm, rights, and justice.

My own approach to natural law is very close to what Hilary Putnam calls "internal"

or "pragmatic" realism (Putnam, 1987, pp. 17, 33). The basic idea is that "there are 'external facts,' and we can *say what they are*. What we *cannot* say—because it makes no sense—is what the facts are *independent of all conceptual choices*," because every reality is internal to some conceptual scheme. "Internal realism" does not imply, of course, that every conceptual scheme is real or valid, but it does imply that there is more than one reality (Shweder, 1986, 1989).

Nevertheless, despite our differences, Turiel and I are both cognitivists, which means that we both believe that rightness and goodness are (in some "good enough" sense) "objective" things (see Putnam, 1985, on some of the "good enough" senses of "objectivity"). We both believe that moral judgments (e.g., it's *right* to prohibit sexual relations between a brother and a sister, even if they are adults and practice birth control; it is *wrong* to torture to death an innocent child) have a truth-value, and that moral judgments can be justified or criticized through argumentation and other rational means. Cognitivists are moral realists, of one variety or another ("metaphysical" realists, "internal" realists, "artful" realists; see Putnam, 1987; Shweder, 1988) who believe there are moral truths and falsities, and that moral values are not simply arbitrary figments of the imagination or whimsical made-up things.

Howard Gabennesch, on the other hand, is a noncognitivist (an "emotivist"), which

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means that he has a robust conception of “convention” and no conception of natural moral law at all. His conception of “convention” is clearly very broad (“human interaction is involved”; “people” make it up [Gabennesch, 1990, in this issue; see pp. 2049, 2051 n. 4, 2053]), yet it is also quite ambiguous. What do people “make up,” their beliefs, or the truth of those beliefs? And even if beliefs, values, institutions, and so on are in some sense discovered or forged through human interaction, does that necessarily mean they are made up?

From Gabennesch’s noncognitive perspective (and given his capacious conception of “convention”), all human values, beliefs, norms, institutions, and role structures (including moral arguments about what is right and wrong or good and bad) are “mere conventions” (i.e., “humanly created”). He argues that *because* human values, beliefs, norms, and so on are humanly created, *all* social formations are arbitrary, whimsical contrivances devoid of “objective” justification (pp. 2048, 2049, 2050, 2055, 2057). From Gabennesch’s emotivist perspective, if children or adults managed to gain insight into the true nature of social formations, they would perceive them as arbitrary contrivances fabricated by human beings.

I do not think the argument succeeds. Human “authorship” (p. 2048) in no way implies that the created product (e.g., a scientific paper or a technological design or a social norm or a cultural value) is arbitrary, whimsical, or devoid of objective value. Human beings may, of course, be “free,” to either ignore the requirements of natural moral laws or to respect them, but that does not mean they are free to make them up.

Blackstone (paraphrased in Hart, 1961, p. 183), a rather highly educated, well-traveled adult who was quite aware of the diversity of social formations, makes the relevant point powerfully. Speaking in defense of a theocratic conception of natural law, he notes that the only difference between the laws of gravity and the Ten Commandments is “the relatively minor one that men, alone of created things, were endowed with reason and free will; and so unlike things, could discover and disobey the divine prescriptions.” One need not be Blackstone or a theocrat to recognize that Gabennesch has overextended the implications of human “authorship,” and has confounded voluntariness, variation, and human discovery with arbitrariness and the absence of natural moral law. His broad conception of convention (“human interaction is involved”)

is too thin to do the work he wants; the leap to arbitrariness and subjectivity is far too presumptive.

Gabennesch goes on to review evidence (some of it my own) that suggests that ordinary folk (children and adults) reason about and offer justifications for their social formations as though they were cognitivists or moral realists with a broad conception of natural moral law. Ordinary folk believe that the rightness or wrongness of social formations (even those that have nothing to do with harm, rights, and justice) (e.g., respect for a flag, polygamy, heterosexuality) are facts of nature, manifestations of a divine intelligence, or in some other way exist as objective obligations independent of human contrivance.

Gabennesch uses that evidence as others have done (e.g., Nisan, 1987; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987) to criticize Turiel’s claim that children and adults universally acknowledge the conventionality of social customs (e.g., dress codes, marriage practices, sex-role definitions). Since I think his criticism is apt, I shall have nothing more to say about it. I congratulate him on drawing that evidence to public attention.

Yet Gabennesch and I place very different interpretations on the evidence. My associates and I (Mahapatra, Much, & Shweder, 1990; Pool, 1989; Shweder, 1986, 1989; Shweder & Miller, 1985; Shweder & Much, 1987; Shweder et al., 1987; also see Miller & Luthar, 1989) have suggested that children and adults do not always or even typically view social practices as conventional because society is, just as the folk think, an appropriate topic for objective moral consideration.

In stark contrast, Gabennesch argues, Nietzschean-like, that social practices are in fact inherently conventional, and that most people are so mystified by the force of custom they do not recognize that fact (see Shweder, 1989, for a critique of the Nietzschean presuppositions of contemporary social theory). He interprets folk cognitivism as mystification, as some deplorable and avoidable form of ethnocentrism (p. 2050), as a survival of childlike moral realism (p. 2051), as the error of reification (p. 2049–2050). He argues that with consciousness raising, accurate information about diversity, a professorial or sociological education, and with exposure to the proper conditions for social cognitive development (the “transparency conditions”) the folk will become noncognitivists (or “emotivists”) and be able to “see through” the values, beliefs, roles, and institutions of society and

## 2062 Child Development

recognize them for what they really are: arbitrary, subjective, changeable human contrivances (“mere conventions”) controlled by human whim (pp. 2050, 2054, 2055, 2057).

I hope it is now clear that I share with Turiel his cognitivism, but not his restricted conception of natural moral law; and I share with Gabennesch his reading of the evidence for a pervasive folk cognitivism or moral realism, but not his emotivist interpretation of it. I think his “transparency conditions” are misguided, and I will say why below. I think the moral realism pervasive in everyday life is not ethnocentrism, except in the trivial sense that every account of reality, even in the “hardest” of sciences, begins with the taken-for-granted results of some prior history of conceptual choices that constitute one’s interpretive “tradition” or “paradigm.” I think folk moral realism has almost nothing to do with the lack of an ability to draw a distinction between subjective made-up conventions and objective moral facts (p. 2051). *Pace* Gabennesch (and the other sociological emotivists he cites), I would argue that moral realism is ubiquitous precisely because society is not cut off from the natural moral order of things; and I would argue, as well, that the social order is an ongoing attempt at an implementation of objective moral qualities, an attempt that could never succeed if everyone were an emotivist.

In a moment I will raise some doubts about Gabennesch’s “transparency conditions.” First, however, I focus on a personal example of moral realism, so as to clarify some of the terms of the argument that is stirring in the moral development literature, an argument that will undoubtedly take on force as a result of the publication of Gabennesch’s provocative essay.

### “It Is Time to Get Dressed”

I suspect it was when my daughter Lauren was 6 years old that I first began to fully appreciate Turiel’s conception of conventionality. I remember well that Saturday morning, 11:00 A.M., when I turned to my daughter and casually and innocently said, “Lauren, it is time to get dressed.” She understood my indirect directive, and she protested, pointing out quite reasonably that she would not be seeing anyone until 5 o’clock that afternoon. She then informed me defiantly that she planned to spend the rest of the day inside the house dressed as she was.

Despite the fact that healthy members of our family invariably change from night-clothes to daytime clothes every morning, my

daughter had apparently not “reified” our family practice. *Pace* Gabennesch, she did not view it as “an unchangeable cosmic product” (p. 2049) or as an automatic law of nature analogous to the laws of gravitational attraction as portrayed in nineteenth-century physics. She was quite prepared to design or make up or be the author of her own routine, and I was quite prepared to tell her she could not!

I repeated my command: “Lauren, it is time to get dressed.” “But, I do not *want* to get dressed,” she said emphatically. “Why don’t you want to get dressed?” I responded, still in control of myself, but floundering, since I was beginning to feel inarticulate. I am not sure what I expected Lauren to say in reply, but what she did say was “*Because* I do not *want* to get dressed” (her emphasis).

At this point in the exchange I realized that I had three verbal options, and none of them seemed especially appealing. My first option was to propound to my 6-year-old a code 1 moral argument. A code 1 moral argument relies heavily on notions of harm, rights, and justice. As I hinted above and shall spell out below, I believe that on a cross-cultural or worldwide scale, the moral domain is a heterogeneous domain consisting of at least three codes for moral argumentation. Codes 2 and 3 shall be discussed later. For the moment, let it suffice for me to note that in my own subculture, in Turiel’s subculture, and in the subculture of most readers of *Child Development*, code 1 harm, rights, and justice argumentation is the most salient and available. (Indeed, I think it is one of the problems with moral development research that Turiel, Kohlberg, Piaget, and many other Western social theorists have tended to define the moral domain in terms of their own code 1 moral reasoning.) The difficulty I faced with my daughter was that I did not find it easy to assimilate my directive (“Lauren, it is time to get dressed”) to a code 1 harm, rights, or justice argument, and I feared that I would lose that argument (at age 6 Lauren was quite capable of invoking rights to freedom of expression and personal choice) if I tried.

My second option reminded me of a line written by Ring Lardner—“Shut up, my father explained.” In other words, I was then much bigger than my daughter. I could play the part of a brute and simply invoke my superior power. I could impose a “convention.” The third option was to engage in some very thin rationalization, to the effect that there are these things called rules of etiquette or of politeness which I do not really under-

stand but which tell you the acceptable things to do, and you must follow them.

It was clear to me at the time that if I selected either of those last two options I would be turning a social custom into a "convention" rather than viewing it as part of the moral order of things. In other words, I would be portraying to my daughter a picture of the social order as an arbitrary, whimsical, contrivance based merely on power or consensus.

It was also clear to me that I did not in fact perceive the practice or custom of changing from nighttime clothes into daytime clothes as a Turiel-like convention. It was important to me that my daughter not spend the whole day in her nightclothes. Even though I knew that the practice of changing from nighttime clothes to daytime clothes might not be a universal practice and may have evolved out of human interaction, I felt the practice expressed a true moral force, although I seemed to lack an adequate discourse for giving expression to it. I would have treated it as quite irrelevant to the (moral) issue at hand to be told that there exists some group of people somewhere in the world who wear the same clothes night and day. If interviewed by Turiel or Nucci or Smetana, I think I would have said that the moral issues at stake (whatever they may be) are what they are regardless of whether some majority of people perceive them as such. In other words, I was disposed to the view that the social or customary order is an expression of an objective moral order even though the (moral) issues at hand extended beyond issues of harm, rights, and justice.

Quite crucially, the mere Gabennesch-like recognition that human beings are the "authors" of clothing was insufficient (indeed, irrelevant) to persuade me that the rightness or wrongness of the practice was made up as well, or merely a matter of whim.

My daughter is now 13 years old. In preparation for writing this comment I interviewed her about the incident I just described. She did not remember it, but she had strong views on it. Although she never spends the day lounging about in her nightclothes, she believes there are circumstances when that would be okay. She distinguishes between types of clothing—nightclothes, lounging clothes, work clothes, formal dress wear—and she believes that each type of clothing has an objective function that it serves. She argues that some nightclothing is comfortable enough to be worn during the day, but only while lounging with the family.

She has a notion of "being presentable." Nightclothes, no matter how comfortable, are not presentable to "outsiders" or "friends." For some reason she thinks you do not have to be presentable to your family members or to yourself; it has something to do with being "genuine." In fact, she is always "presentable," even when at home alone.

Quite coincidentally, we had a female Indian visitor staying with us when I interviewed by daughter. I asked my visitor to comment on the original incident. She noted that in her household everyone routinely takes a bath and changes clothes before eating breakfast, and that none of her children would ever consider doing otherwise, but that if a child was found lounging about all day in nightclothes it would be considered "inauspicious" for the family, and they would worry that something bad might happen in the future. She might tell that to her children. In her view, the obligation to wear the proper clothes for the proper occasion is not arbitrary. It has something to do with respect for oneself, for others, for one's station in life, for god, and for the rhythms of nature.

It is the main strength of Gabennesch's article that it draws attention to the prevalence of such cases, where (*given Turiel's conception of morality and convention*) obligations are perceived to be *neither* moral (related to issues of harm, rights, and justice) *nor* conventional, but are still perceived to have an objective authority.

### **The Heterogeneity of the Moral: The Three Codes**

The more important issue, however, still remains, and that is what to make of those cases. There are two interpretations I would like to offer.

The first interpretation is that the idea of obligations as conventional and of morality as reducible to issues of harm, rights, and justice is not a universal feature of everyday social cognition. With that interpretation, Gabennesch concurs. It is his main empirical point. But why aren't they universal features of social cognition? In my view, the most promising answer is that the domain of objective moral obligation is not reducible to code 1 (harm, rights, and justice) moral discourse, and most peoples of the world (except perhaps secularized liberal individualists and emotivists) recognize this.

Some of our own evidence on "moral realism" (i.e., an objective moral orientation in India to dress codes, naming practices, di-

## 2064 Child Development

etary restrictions, and sex-role obligations) was presented in Shweder et al. (1987). In a fruitful and brilliant response to that evidence, published in the same volume, Turiel et al. (1987) introduced a distinction between "direct moral events," "conventional events," and "unearthly belief mediated moral events." They classified 29 of our hypothetical transgression events (e.g., a widow in your community eats fish two or three times a week) using that more differentiated tripartite scheme (a residual or impure or mixed moral-conventional category was used as well).

It is especially noteworthy that even as Turiel et al. elaborated their analytic categories, they continued to define all moral events (the direct moral events and the unearthly belief mediated moral events) in terms of code 1 concepts (harm, rights, and justice). The only difference for them between direct and mediated moral events is that for mediated moral events it is "unearthly" entities (e.g., ancestral spirits) who may be harmed or have their rights violated.

While this is an important step in a useful direction, it is probably not a sufficient accommodation to the evidence. Our recent work (Shweder, Much, Pool, & Dixon, in preparation) suggests that there is indeed, as Turiel et al. suggest, a significant tripartite distinction to be drawn when classifying the way our traditional Hindu informants argue about their obligations, yet it is not the one they propose.

A distinction needs to be drawn between moral arguments based on appeals to harm, rights, and justice (code 1) versus moral arguments based on appeals to duty, hierarchy, and interdependency (code 2) versus moral arguments based on appeals to natural order, sacred order, tradition, sin, and personal sanctity (code 3). There are three moral discourse realms, and they seem to pick up different aspects of the self or different ways of conceiving of the self.

Code 1 moral discourse focuses on the individual as a preference structure with autonomy to make free choices. Code 2 moral discourse focuses on the person as part of a community, an attendant at court with a position or station or role that is intimately connected to the self. Code 3 moral discourse focuses on the self as a spiritual entity and protects that spiritual essence from acts (e.g., eating slaughtered animals) that are degrading or disproportionate to our spiritual nature.

It is also noteworthy that when our Hindu informants use code 1 discourse (harm,

rights, justice), Turiel et al. tend to classify it as a "direct moral event." When Hindus use code 2 discourse (duty, hierarchy, interdependency), Turiel et al. tend to classify it as a "conventional event" (all hierarchical formations get treated by Turiel et al. as heteronomous and thus as arbitrary). And when Hindus use code 3 discourse (natural order, sacred order, tradition, personal sanctity, sin), Turiel et al. try to assimilate it to their expanded code 1 notion of "unearthly belief mediated moral events." The commitment of Western social scientists to a code 1 (harm, rights, and justice) metatheory for morality dies hard (see Pool, 1989, for a discussion and developmental study of the way discourse concerning "other's welfare" gets expanded in code 1 subcultures).

### Some Doubts about Conventionalism

The second interpretation I would like to offer is the following: the idea that social formations are arbitrary contrivances ("mere conventions") is empirically absent in many cases precisely because "conventionalism" is not the ideal normative endpoint for social cognitive development. Gabennesch, of course, holds the opposite view, namely, that a fully developed social intelligence would be free of all moral realism and would perceive all social formations as devoid of objective justification (e.g., pp. 2055, 2057). I think he is quite wrong about this, which is why I have doubts about his "transparency" conditions.

As I suggested in another context (Shweder et al., 1987), the very idea that the social order is a conventional order is an expression of a culture-specific worldview, which gained some notoriety in Western liberal social thought during the "enlightenment" and lingers on in contemporary social science theories in sociology, anthropology, and psychology. It is the worldview that comes along with education in certain subcultures in the West. That worldview is conspicuously present in the Gabennesch essay (see Shweder, 1982, 1989). Indeed, it is because of that worldview that he interprets folk cognitivism or moral realism as mystification, reification, ethnocentrism, or opacity. He proposes several "transparency" conditions to help the folk see through the fog and to recognize that society is just made up, that it is a subjective, arbitrary contrivance.

I have doubts about the cogency of several of the proposed attributes. Why, for example, should utility or instrumental purpose

imply arbitrariness and human authorship? After all, teleologists have for thousands of years appealed to the utility of social formations (e.g., the sexual division of labor) to support claims about natural obligations and the existence of a divine intelligence.

Instead of enumerating those doubts, however, I would like to make the following wager with Gabennesch. I'll bet that in code 2 and code 3 subcultures none of the transparency conditions will be sufficient to induce the perception of social formations as arbitrary contrivances; and in code 1 subcultures, none of the transparency conditions will be necessary to induce that perception. Why? Because in code 2 and 3 subcultures (where the folk are armed with intellectually powerful concepts such as duty, sanctity, sin, and divine intelligence) there will be no rational need for the idea that society is conventional, while in code 1 subcultures the idea that social obligations are merely conventional will be implied by the radical restriction of natural moral law to the individualistic issues of harm, rights, and justice. In code 1 subcultures, many social practices and obligations will simply be driven out of the realm of natural moral law, due to a prior conceptual choice.

Thus it seems to me a fairly secure observation that highly educated, well-traveled members of fundamentalist religious traditions (in Iran, India, or the United States) who are quite knowledgeable about cross-cultural variations in social practices and are not "penned in a coffin-size box" (p. 2047) do not suddenly "see through" the social order or graduate into emotivists or conventionalists. The mere recognition of diversity does not lead them to view their social formations as arbitrary human contrivances parading as an objective set of obligations. Their code 2 and code 3 conceptions of nature and natural moral law permit them to comprehend diversity in terms of "evil" or "moral decay" or "just dessert" or "local contextual constraints" or "immaturity," without viewing the order of things as made up.

I can formulate my wager in somewhat different terms. I'll bet that contentless features of social formations (such as their familiarity, simplicity, recency, specificity, and utility—the "transparency" conditions) have no main effect on the perception of society as an arbitrary human creation (where by "main effect" I mean an effect that holds across groups who differ in their substantive theories of natural moral law, e.g., codes 1–3).

Counterexamples to the hypothesized transparency effects are just too easy to generate. "No work on the sabbath day" is a familiar and simple injunction specific to orthodox Jews, which, for orthodox Jews, retains its objective force. Customary obligations in India (e.g., vegetarianism, prohibitions on widow remarriage) vary across castes and communities, yet those variations in practices are perceived as objectively tailored for each group or as badges of superiority or inferiority. Among Mormons, when revelation by a leader results in the creation of a new social practice, that new practice is not perceived as a human contrivance. Conversely, the English language is many generations old and is transmitted through multiple socializing institutions; yet how many code 1 secular individualists have been led by the antiquity of their language to view the sound patterns of English as the products of natural law? The list of counterexamples goes on and on.

For most of his discussion (of ethnocentrism, of childlike moral realism, of reification, of opacity) Gabennesch relies on the concept of convention in his broad sense, as anything that emerges out of human interaction or has a human author (n. 4; p. 2048). He argues (mistakenly, in my view, as noted earlier) that human authorship implies that social formations are arbitrary contrivances opposed to natural law. He states that "*all* social formations are conventional [that is to say, arbitrary contrivances unconnected to natural law] including those that express moral principles of transcendent importance" (his emphasis, p. 2048).

Yet late in the article one finds a loose (and startling) thread dangling (p. 2055). He acknowledges, almost as an aside, that some social formations may not be perceived as conventional by subjects, because, as Turiel has argued, they in fact possess "intrinsic moral value" and thus are not conventional (p. 2055). For the first and only time, there appears in the essay a faint recognition that not *all* social formations are devoid of objective value, and that perhaps not every social formation is the product of an arbitrary subjectivity.

Gabennesch does not tell us about his theory of intrinsic moral value (Does he have one, after all? Is he a closet cognitivist?). Nor does he acknowledge that in Turiel et al. (1987) those authors try very hard to account for adult moral realism (e.g., Hindu dietary "taboos" and beliefs about the sacred cow) (what Gabennesch would label as a reification or mystification or opacity or "mere conven-

## 2066 Child Development

tion”) in terms of the intrinsic code 1 moral values associated with “unearthly belief mediated moral events.” He does not consider the possibility that most social formations, even those that vary from culture to culture (arranged marriage in India vs. love marriage in the United States) may be derivable from natural moral laws (codes 1–3). He simply notes, without sufficient comment, that “. . . research on the perception of social formations must take care to avoid confounding transparency with other variables, such as the presence or absence of intrinsic moral significance in social norms” (p. 2055). Had he started his essay with that observation, he might have written a different article. For if the various internal moral realisms and “intrinsic” moral significances of the folk of the world were appreciated as rational (i.e., “cognitive”) structures, we might not need to appeal to extrinsic transparency conditions at all to “explain” moral realism.

Emotivists like Gabennesch may look for external conditions to explain moral realism, but it is my wager that they will fail. To understand the power and persistence of moral realism, one cannot begin with the presupposition that there is no such thing as moral truth or natural moral law. The folk know better, and we can learn something from them by trying to understand the world in their terms.

In conclusion, adult moral realism is not childlike (egocentric) realism in Piaget’s sense, nor is it some avoidable or deplorable form of opacity, reification, or ethnocentrism. Society is connected to natural moral law, but there are several natural moral worlds. The problem we face, as children and as adults, is that, at any point in time, we can reason and live in only one moral world. If that is ethnocentrism, then ethnocentrism is not something we can, or should, do without.

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