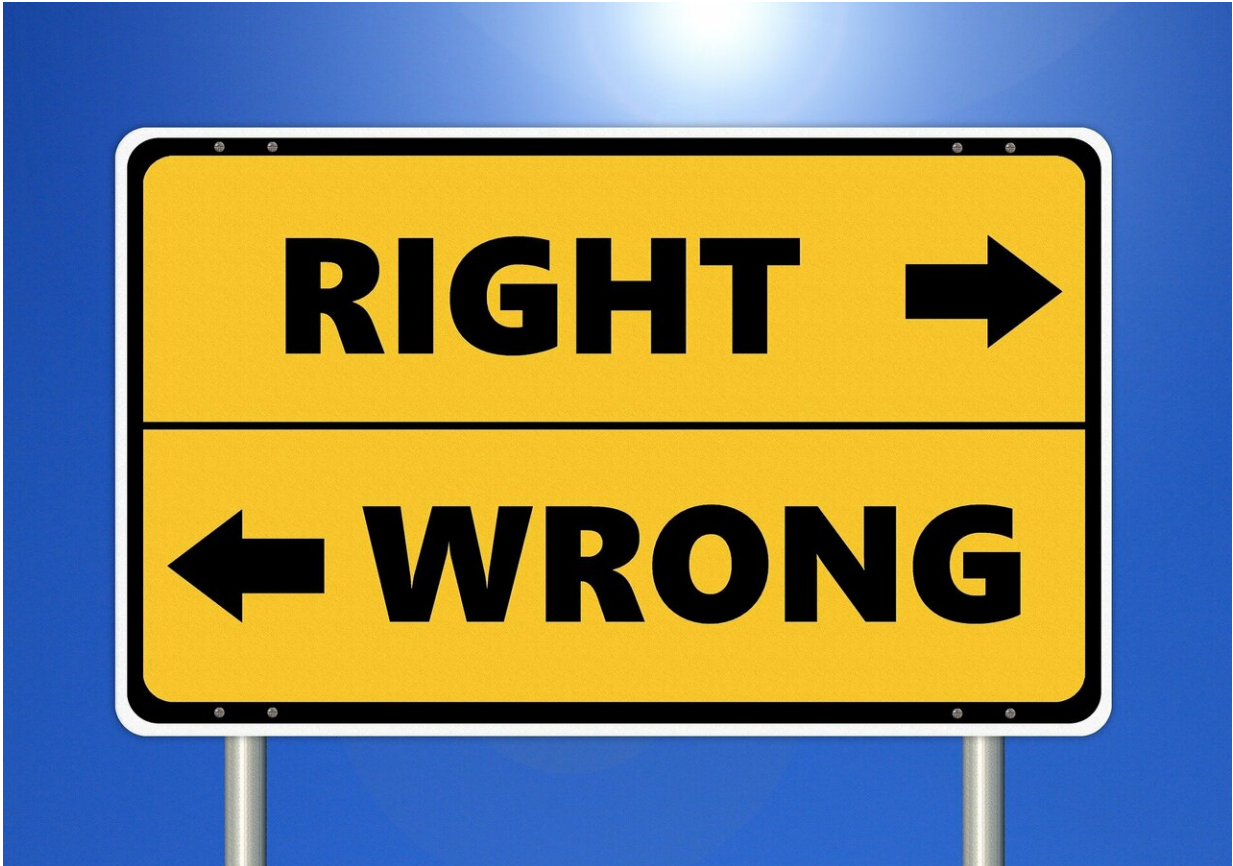


Seven moral rules found all around the world

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Anthropologists at the University of Oxford have discovered what they believe to be seven universal moral rules.

The rules: help your family, help your group, return favours, be brave,

defer to superiors, divide resources fairly, and respect others' property. These were found in a survey of 60 cultures from all around the world.

Previous studies have looked at some of these rules in some places – but none has looked at all of them in a large representative sample of societies. The present study, published in *Current Anthropology*, is the largest and most comprehensive cross-cultural survey of morals ever conducted.

The team from Oxford's Institute of Cognitive & Evolutionary Anthropology (part of the School of Anthropology & Museum Ethnography) analysed ethnographic accounts of ethics from 60 societies, comprising over 600,000 words from over 600 sources.

Dr. Oliver Scott Curry, lead author and senior researcher at the Institute for Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, said: "The debate between moral universalists and moral relativists has raged for centuries, but now we have some answers. People everywhere face a similar set of social problems, and use a similar set of moral rules to solve them. As predicted, these seven moral rules appear to be universal across cultures. Everyone everywhere shares a common moral code. All agree that cooperating, promoting the common good, is the right thing to do."

The study tested the theory that morality evolved to promote cooperation, and that – because there are many types of cooperation – there are many types of morality. According to this theory of 'morality as cooperation,' kin selection explains why we feel a special duty of care for our families, and why we abhor incest. Mutualism explains why we form groups and coalitions (there is strength and safety in numbers), and hence why we value unity, solidarity, and loyalty. Social exchange explains why we trust others, reciprocate favours, feel guilt and gratitude, make amends, and forgive. And [conflict resolution](#) explains why we engage in costly displays of prowess such as bravery and

generosity, why we defer to our superiors, why we divide disputed resources fairly, and why we recognise prior possession.

The research found, first, that these seven cooperative behaviours were always considered morally good. Second, examples of most of these morals were found in most societies. Crucially, there were no counter-examples – no societies in which any of these behaviours were considered morally bad. And third, these morals were observed with equal frequency across continents; they were not the exclusive preserve of 'the West' or any other region.

So, among the Amhara, 'flouting kinship obligation is regarded as a shameful deviation, indicating an evil character.' In Korea, there exists an 'egalitarian community ethic [of] mutual assistance and cooperation among neighbors [and] strong in-group solidarity.' "Reciprocity is observed in every stage of Garo life [and] has a very high place in the Garo social structure of values." Among the Maasai, "Those who cling to warrior virtues are still highly respected," and 'the uncompromising ideal of supreme warriorhood [involves] ascetic commitment to self-sacrifice...in the heat of battle, as a supreme display of courageous loyalty.' The Bemba exhibit 'a deep sense of respect for elders' authority.' The Kapauku 'idea of justice' is called 'uta-uta, half-half...[the meaning of which] comes very close to what we call equity.' And among the Tarahumara, 'respect for the property of others is the keystone of all interpersonal relations.'

The study also detected "variation on a theme"—although all societies seemed to agree on the seven basic moral rules, they varied in how they prioritised or ranked them. The team has now developed a new moral values questionnaire to gather data on modern moral values, and is investigating whether cross-cultural variation in moral values reflects variation in the value of cooperation under different social conditions.

According to co-author Professor Harvey Whitehouse, anthropologists are uniquely placed to answer long-standing questions about moral universals and moral relativism. "Our study was based on historical descriptions of cultures from around the world; this data was collected prior to, and independently of, the development of the theories that we were testing. Future work will be able to test more fine-grained predictions of the theory by gathering new data, even more systematically, out in the field.

"We hope that this research helps to promote mutual understanding between people of different cultures; an appreciation of what we have in common, and how and why we differ," added Curry.

The full paper, "Is it good to cooperate? Testing the theory of morality-as-cooperation in 60 societies," can be read in *Current Anthropology*.

More information: Oliver Scott Curry et al. Is It Good to Cooperate? Testing the Theory of Morality-as-Cooperation in 60 Societies, *Current Anthropology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1086/701478](https://doi.org/10.1086/701478)

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