

Title: Morality: When it matters and why

Author: Paul A.M. Van Lange, VU University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

Morality has become a vibrant and inspiring topic in the biological, social, and behavioral sciences. Various definitions and perspectives have been advanced, but one common theme is that it includes a “code of conduct” that is used by a society or a well-defined group within a society. That code of conduct defines the appropriate course of action (or non-action), and sometimes the standards for appropriateness are clearly defined. In this contribution, we illustrate some key principles regarding morality. First, we seek to provide a logic for understanding the specifics of the situations in which morality matters. An argument will be made that morality matters most in situations in which the pursuit of self-interest brings with it harm or cost to specific others, a collective, well-defined group, or even a well-defined principle, now or in the future. Second, morality provides a strong guide for own actions (or non-actions) , and this should be especially true for situations in which people feel conflicts that may well be characterized approach-avoidance conflicts. The key question is how much harm is justified in the pursuit of self-interest. But morality, and especially moral evaluations, are also strongly used in judging others’ behavior. Finally, we suggest that morality – and moral evaluations - serves the important function of social regulation. Morality helps to increase the salience of the harmful effects that might be caused by one’s own actions. The social spreading of moral evaluations, in the form of reputation, is a key factor in promoting behavior that serves others, collectives, well-defined groups, and even well-defined principles. It also promotes the expectation that others will also act on the basis of such broader concerns.