Canadian Journal of Philosophy (2026), 56: e32, 1–9
doi:10.1017/can.2026.10078

DISTINGUISHED LECTURE

Defending Morality

Wayne Sumner

Department of Philosophy, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Email: wayne.sumner@utoronto.ca

Abstract
The authority—and even the relevance—of morality have come under attack recently in Ronald de Sousa's advocacy of amoralism. I here come to morality's defense.

Keywords: morality; ethics; amoralism

Some fashions in philosophical ethics come and go, while others seem perennial. Among the latter are attempts to answer the question "Why should we be moral?" Though this has frequently been dismissed as a pseudo-question,[1] philosophers still appear to take seriously the project of providing morality with some kind of firm ground, derived most commonly either from self-interest or from the requirements of practical rationality.[2] I have no intention of adding to this still-flourishing literature by debating the merits of these strategies (though I strongly suspect that both are doomed to failure). Instead, I want to explore the prospects of a novel approach to the question that turns it on its head by offering us reasons to *not* be moral, or at least to not take morality so seriously.

I have in mind here the vigorous defense of amoralism that has been mounted over the past few years by Ronald de Sousa, most recently in his stimulating little book *Why It's OK to Be Amoral* (de Sousa, 2019, 2021, 2024). Far from looking for reasons to be moral, de Sousa aligns himself as a "moral abolitionist" (de Sousa, 2024, p. 83), arguing that we should "forget morality" (de Sousa, 2021).[3] My aim here is twofold: to find out what, exactly, de Sousa means by amoralism, and to assess the case he makes in favor of it. Along the way, I hope that we will learn a few things about what, exactly, morality consists in and whether it would be desirable, or even possible, to give it up entirely.

Just to get things started, I will assume that morality is the practice of evaluating actions or states of affairs by means of certain normative categories—right/wrong, good/bad, just/unjust, etc.—and utilizing these evaluations in our practical deliberations. As a first approximation, then, amoralism appears to be the wholesale rejection of this practice. As de Sousa states the case, "An *amoralist* is one who rejects the relevance of *any* judgment, property or demands in the moral domain" (de Sousa, 2024, p. 13). (We will have occasion later to examine both morality and amoralism more closely.) De Sousa's positive case in favor of amoralism consists almost entirely in a negative case against morality, so conceived. Concerning the latter, he has four principal complaints:

[1]See, e.g., Prichard (1912), Thornton (1970). For discussion, see Birnbacher (2015), Schaber (2015).
[2]See, e.g., Himmelman and Louden (2015).
[3]Cf. de Sousa (2024, p. 22): "we would be better off if we ceased to worry about morality."

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Inc. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2026.10078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(1) Morality claims that moral reasons trump all other reasons for action.
(2) Morality double counts some reasons for action.
(3) Morality is totalizing, applying in principle to every facet of life.
(4) Morality licenses ugly emotions, including self-righteousness, shame, and guilt.

This is quite the charge sheet. In what follows, I will consider each of these allegations in turn. But first, we need to note that de Sousa prepares the ground for his case against morality by adopting an anti-realist stance concerning moral language. One form that his anti-realism takes is denial that there are any moral facts (de Sousa, 2024, pp. 73, 163–176). His argument that moral assertions cannot be factual runs like this:

> A factual statement is deemed correct only if its content conforms to or *fits* the way things are in the world. That reflects a minimal definition of truth: *an utterance of 'p' is true if and only if p is the case.* Thus, an expression with *mind-to-world* direction of fit is correct only if the mental state expressed conforms to the way things are in the world, regardless of what we think or want. By contrast, when you utter an *ought*-statement, as in *There ought to be equality of opportunity*, the inequality that exists in the actual world does not invalidate your claim. The point of an ought-statement is precisely to call for the world to conform to what is called for in the utterance, not to conform to the world as it is. Ought-statements therefore have a *world-to-mind* direction of fit. (de Sousa, 2024, pp. 7–8)

This argument appears to assume that if there are any facts to which moral statements refer, then these facts must be empirical: in the foregoing example, the existence (or otherwise) of equality in the world. But this assumption is unwarranted: if the moral assertion *There ought to be equality of opportunity* is factual, then the fact to which it refers must itself be moral: the fact that equality of opportunity *ought to exist*, not that it does exist. To be correct, the statement must have a mind-to-world fit with that fact. Of course, there may be no such fact, but this argument does nothing to show that. This is even clearer with moral *is*-statements, such as *The current disparity between rich and poor is wrong or unjust.* If this statement refers to a fact, then it must be the wrongness or injustice of the inequality, not its existence.

In any case, de Sousa more frequently characterizes his anti-realism in terms, not of facts, but of truth. "Realism in a given domain," he tells us, "is the doctrine that the truths of that domain are independent of anyone's attitudes, emotions or beliefs." It follows that "moral realism is the view that moral truths would be what they are even if no one knew or cared" (de Sousa, 2024, p. 6). It is this view that he rejects.

De Sousa's case against moral truth largely hangs on the failure by moral philosophers to agree on "a foundational principle so compelling that no one, regardless of cultural background, can fail to assent to it" (de Sousa, 2024, p. 140). Any such putative principle, he contends, inevitably turns out to be less credible than the particular instances which it is meant to justify. Much of *Why It's OK to Be Amoral* is devoted to exposing the inadequacies of standard foundational theories, especially utilitarianism and Kantian deontology. De Sousa contends that this inability to secure the foundations of morality is best explained by the hypothesis that moral statements are not truth-apt. Rejecting the alternative of embracing an error theory, he says "in the absence of good reasons to accept the existence of objective facts of normative morality, a noncognitivist account of the nature of moral convictions as projections of our emotional responses is defensible" (de Sousa, 2024, p. 73).

This is not the place to debate the implications of foundational disagreement in ethics, nor the case for embracing noncognitivism in light of it.[4] But it is the place to ask how, or whether, noncognitivism, once embraced, supports amoralism. In the broadest sense, noncognitivism is the

[4]On these topics, see Kagan (2023, Chs. 5 & 4), respectively. At least ethics is in good company here: no one has yet found a unifying foundational theory for physics either.

https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2026.10078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

view that moral assertions are best interpreted, not as stating facts, but as expressing attitudes, especially attitudes of approval and disapproval. Over the course of the past century, many philosophers have advocated one or another variant of this view. However, as far as I am aware, none of them has drawn from it the conclusion that we should abandon moral language, or morality, altogether. Richard Hare, the most prominent twentieth-century exponent of a non-cognitivist metaethic, argued that his universal prescriptivism actually entailed a version of preference utilitarianism (Hare, 1963, 1981). Even without Hare's chutzpah, noncognitivists—indeed anti-realists in general—have mostly seemed quite willing to engage with normative issues. Absent some further argument, the hypothesis that moral language is best understood as expressing attitudes, rather than describing some domain of moral facts, does not seem to support the admonition to give it up entirely. It is therefore hard for me to see how the realism/anti-realism debate has much bearing on the case for amoralism. To find such a case, we need to look at de Sousa's more particular complaints about morality.

1. Moral Reasons as Trumps

One of those complaints is that morality claims overriding authority for moral reasons over nonmoral ones. As de Sousa puts it: "Some [reasons] take the form of rules claiming a special status in virtue of being *moral* reasons, which automatically outweigh other types of reasons" (de Sousa, 2021). And again: when a reason wears "the special badge of morality then, most philosophers insist, it is 'definitive, final, overriding, or supremely authoritative'."[5] The view that moral reasons always trump nonmoral ones in this fashion, indeed that having this kind of overriding authority is what marks them as moral, has indeed had its defenders; Hare, for example, was a prominent exponent. But this starkly formal conception of the nature of moral reasons was not widely shared even back in Hare's day. In his mid-1960s survey of the landscape, William Frankena could attribute it to only a minority of his colleagues at the time (Frankena, 1966). It has even less currency nowadays.[6] The more common view is that moral reasons, however they are conceptualized, compete in our practical deliberations with nonmoral ones—aesthetic, prudential, religious, conventional, legal, etc.—and may not always win. Henry Sidgwick, famously, could find no argument for the rational superiority of an impartial morality over egoism (Sidgwick, 1907, Concluding Chapter), and the track record of those who have taken on the same task since is not encouraging. There seems no reason, therefore, to fear the imperialistic pretensions of morality.

Although de Sousa attributes the formal view to "most philosophers," he does not adopt it himself. He cannot, since it would be fatal to his project. The formal view would have the unwelcome implication that amoralism is impossible: whatever reasons an agent takes to be overriding in their practical deliberations will, on this conception, count as their morality. But if we reject the formal conception, we are then left with the question of how to identify distinctively moral reasons. What makes a reason a *moral* reason?

It is common nowadays to address this question by identifying moral reasons in terms of their content—what they are *about*—rather than their supposed dominance within the structure of practical reasoning. Frankena referred to such conceptions of the moral as material, rather than formal. De Sousa cites one such conception, advanced by Bernard Gert:

> Morality is an informal public system applying to all rational persons, governing behavior that affects others, and includes what are commonly known as the moral rules, ideals, and virtues and has the lessening of evil or harm as its goal. (de Sousa, 2024, p. 23)[7]

[5]de Sousa (2021). The quoted phrase is from Frankena (1966, p. 688). Cf. de Sousa (2024, p. 113): "Only some [reasons] are deemed *moral*; those, we are taught, trump all other types of reasons."

[6]It is noteworthy that Gert and Gert (2025), despite describing the view as "common," do not cite a single exponent of it.

[7]The source is Gert (2005, p. 14).

https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2026.10078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Though a promising start, this formulation has significant drawbacks (some of them noted by de Sousa). For one thing, it is annoyingly circular, with morality being defined, in part, by reference to "moral rules, ideals, and virtues." It is also quite narrow, both in its restriction to "behavior that affects others" (thereby excluding self-regarding norms) and in its limitation of the goal of morality to "the lessening of evil or harm" (thereby excluding the promotion of good or benefit). Frankena provided an account rather freer of these defects, way back in 1966:

> [Morality] includes or consists of judgments (rules, principles, ideals, etc.) that pronounce actions and agents to be right, wrong, good, bad, etc., simply because of the effect they have on the feelings, interests, ideals, etc., of other persons or centers of sentient experience, actual or hypothetical (or perhaps simply because of their effects on humanity, whether in [one's] own person or in that of another). (Frankena, 1966, p. 689)

As Frankena noted: "On this conception, a morality must embody some kind of social concern or consideration; it cannot be purely prudential or purely aesthetic" (Ibid.). However, it can take into account, *inter alia*, effects on one's own interests as well as the interests of others.

Similar material conceptions of morality have been advanced by others.[8] However, on the other side of the question, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has recently argued that morality is too disunified to be defined in terms of its content: there is no single identifying feature that is common to all and only moral judgements or reasons (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2016, pp. 335–338).[9] If Sinnott-Armstrong is right, we may have to say about morality what US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously said about pornography: while we cannot define it, we know it when we see it.

De Sousa appears to have embraced this counsel of despair, for he suggests that "we need not waste intellectual energy on attempts to demarcate 'moral' from all other concerns" (de Sousa, 2024, p. 72). However, I do not think he can afford this luxury. Recall that amoralism is defined negatively as the rejection of moral judgements and moral reasons for action. If so, then living as a consistent amoralist would seem to require being able to determine which judgements and reasons are moral: otherwise, how does one know which to reject? Perhaps in many contexts, we could get by well enough without a reliable conception of morality, but this would not appear to be one of them.

In any case, I think that the definitional problem is somewhat overstated. As Sinnott-Armstrong says, it is difficult to find a set of strictly necessary and sufficient conditions for judgements or reasons to count as moral. In that case, we might have to settle for something like family resemblances or an overlapping consensus. However, this might be, we can still say, with Frankena, that the heart of morality has to do with the effects of actions or states of affairs on the interests of "other persons or centers of sentient experience." Moral considerations paradigmatically come into play when someone or something stands to be made better or worse off by someone else's course of action. A morality may incorporate other considerations as well, but it cannot lack this one. This focus on the social dimension of morality may be enough for us to be getting on with.

2. The Double Counting of Moral Reasons

We turn next to the most insistent of de Sousa's complaints about morality. Here is his canonical statement of it:

> Suppose doing X will cause someone pain. That may strike you as a reason to refrain from doing X. That, moralists will tell you, 'grounds' another reason not to do X, namely that doing so would be immoral. So now it looks like you have two reasons to refrain from X instead of one: first, that X will cause pain, and second, that X is immoral. But since this second reason

[8]See, e.g., Toulmin (1950), Baier (1958), Deigh (2010).
[9]Cf. Gert and Gert (2025).

https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2026.10078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> was 'grounded' in the first, what can it add to it? What justifies this sort of double counting, and what entitles it to override other, 'non-moral', reasons? (de Sousa, 2024, p. 113)

The root of the problem, as de Sousa sees it, lies in the supervenience of moral properties on natural ones (de Sousa, 2024, p. 119ff): if an action is judged to be right, or wrong, then it must have some natural properties in virtue of which it is so. An action may therefore have two properties: one natural (causes pain), one moral (wrong). If the former gives us good reason to avoid doing it, what need do we have of the latter?

We can agree with de Sousa that this double counting of reasons would be absurd. But he appears to tie the double counting allegation to his previous contention that morality treats moral reasons as trumps. This comes out in the last sentence of the above-quoted passage, and even more clearly in this one:

> Moralists will tell you that your reason A [not to cause pain], also 'grounds' *another* reason not to do X, namely that it would be *immoral.* And on that basis, reason A … now gets to be 'inescapable', 'overriding' any reason you had in favour of X: that it would be exciting, say, or memorable. So now it seems that reason A … gives you *two* reasons not to do X: reason A (that it will cause pain), plus *the fact that X is immoral.* But since this second reason was just grounded on reason A, what can it possibly add to it? How can it suddenly make reason A override all other reasons? It seems to be just a way of counting it twice. (de Sousa, 2021)

Absent this conception of morality as automatically overriding, the force of the objection is much diminished. If moral reasons are identified as such strictly in terms of their content—what they are about—then categorizing them as moral gives them no added normative force. They are then left to compete with nonmoral reasons within the overall framework of practical rationality. There is no guarantee that they will always win; in some circumstances what you ought to do, or at least are permitted to do, all things considered, may not be what morality recommends. But if moral reasons at least frequently track significant interests at stake (such as the causing of harm to others), then they are likely to have significant weight against competing nonmoral reasons (such as being exciting or memorable). So they will frequently, though not inevitably, outweigh the competition without needing any additional normative boost.

3. Morality as Totalizing

De Sousa complains that the principles of morality claim "total authority over every action and even every thought" (de Sousa, 2021), that they "extend their tentacles to virtually every choice" (de Sousa, 2024, p. 81).[10] He is definitely on to something here: there is no way to prevent moral or ethical considerations from applying to virtually everything we do, however private or inconsequential it might seem. You decide to purchase a new smartphone, replacing your current three-year-old model. This seems the very paradigm of a purely personal decision, perhaps balancing the cost of the new model against its improved features, until you stumble on an article in the *Guardian* that inconveniently tracks the enormous CO2 emissions that result from mining the rare materials inside the phone.[11] Buying this phone, you learn, will consume as much energy as operating and recharging your existing phone for an entire decade. Be kind to the environment, the author exhorts, and just persist with your current device.

You want to ignore this unwelcome intrusion, but you cannot, in good conscience, deny its moral relevance. Your decision now looks less private; now you need to weigh the impact of your intended purchase on greenhouse gas emissions (which we will assume to be an ethical matter) against your

[10]Cf. de Sousa (2024, p. 94).
[11]Naughton (2021).

https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2026.10078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

own personal needs. You might in the end decide that your needs are urgent enough to prevail, so that it is OK, all things considered, to buy the phone. But you had to reason your way through the ethical considerations to get to this conclusion. And the same intervention of the ethical can, in principle, complicate virtually any decision you make. That is what de Sousa means by morality's totalizing propensity: moral reasons can pop up pretty much anywhere.

He thinks that is a bad thing, but I do not. I think that we should not want it any other way. If moral reasons kick in whenever significant interests are at stake, then as conscientious agents we should want to know when that is. The fact that the scope of ethics or morality is pervasive in this way results directly from its nature. But it is a threat to our ability to conduct our everyday lives only if moral reasons are thought to automatically override all competing considerations. If we drop that idea and just give moral reasons their due weight on a case-by-case basis, then morality need not be, as de Sousa claims, "oppressively intrusive" (de Sousa, 2021). It will just be virtually always relevant and, as conscientious agents, we should want it to be.

It matters here that de Sousa is working exclusively with the imperative, legalistic part of morality: the part that consists in rules imposing duties. Duties are, indeed, annoyingly constraining, and it is easy to suppose that this is what morality is all about. De Sousa points out, correctly, that where the law is concerned "many things are neither legally compulsory nor forbidden" (Ibid.). But the same is true in any sensible system of morality, and much of moral life lies in this territory of the permissible. It is here where moral assessment stops taking a deontic form and trades instead in the axiological language of good or bad, better or worse. Your decision to buy a new smartphone arguably belongs in this territory: you do not have a duty not to buy it (and you certainly do not have a duty to buy it), but it might be better, from an ethical standpoint, if you did not.

4. Moral Emotions

Morality, de Sousa claims, "licenses ugly emotions. It encourages us to feel contemptuous of others who fail to share our principles, or superior to those who fail to live up to them" (Ibid.). While we can probably all agree that feelings of contempt or smug superiority are not attractive, they are not confined to the moral domain. Contempt for those whose aesthetic standards are deemed to be shallow or philistine is rife in the worlds of art criticism, literary theory, and wine-tasting, to name but a few. And there is no surpassing the smugness of fitness addicts when they look down on us couch potatoes. Morality did not invent these attitudes, nor are they necessarily uglier when they take a moral form.

De Sousa's principal target, however, is guilt, which he calls the primary moral emotion. While he acknowledges the motivational power of guilt to induce us to raise our game, he says that "simple regret is no less apt to inform and guide future choices." Regret is to be preferred, he says, because it "is not tied to the moral domain" (Ibid.). However, as de Sousa recognizes, neither is guilt (de Sousa, 2024, p. 172). Feelings of guilt are occasioned by the recognition of having failed, in some conspicuous way, to live up to one's own standards. Those standards need not be moral ones. The fitness addict, mentioned above, may feel guilty when skipping their daily workout; the workaholic may feel guilty about taking a break to watch some baseball. Moral guilt does not seem different in kind from nonmoral guilt. However, if there is typically more at stake in moral choices than in nonmoral ones—because of their impact on the interests of sentient creatures—then it may actually be easier to make a case for guilt in this domain. Regret for one's failures is all very well, but guilt has a sharper sting. If we want people to raise their moral game—and we surely do—then we may need its additional motivational force.

5. Amoralism

For all of the foregoing reasons, I remain unpersuaded by the case that de Sousa has tried to make for amoralism. But I am left with one further question: What is amoralism, exactly? What would it be like to "forget morality"?

https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2026.10078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

De Sousa offers a few tips for leading the amoral life (de Sousa, 2024, pp. 176–178), but does not provide a very full picture. As he rightly insists, we need to distinguish operating *without* morality from operating *against* it. The immoralist (if they exist) presumably sets out to transgress against as many moral demands as possible ("Evil, be thou my good"). The immoralist therefore *needs* morality; otherwise, they have nothing against which to transgress. If the moralist favors morality and the immoralist disfavors it, that suggests that the amoralist is indifferent to it, can get by just fine without it. Perhaps we need to ask what the amoralist puts in the place of moral rules and moral reasons.

De Sousa's answer is suggested by one of his tips: "Substitute *want* for *ought*, *should* or *must*" (de Sousa, 2024, p. 177). The amoralist's recourse seems to be to desires. De Sousa writes:

> …to renounce morality is to wake up to the fact that in every choice we are governed by desires. Some desires are for something we just want for itself; others are for ways or means of satisfying those. All constitute or are grounded in reasons to act. Those reasons can be almost exactly those that move the moralist. (de Sousa, 2021)[12] .

His point here seems to be that amoralists can have reasons to do all the things that moralists would do; they just do not need *moral* reasons—reasons that take the form of doing the right thing *because it is right.*[13] De Sousa continues the above-quoted passage:

> I have perfectly good reasons for my desire not to cause harm, not to act unfairly, or to be kind. These reasons derive both from my first-order reasons and from my reflection on them. They matter not because of morality, but because I care.

De Sousa and I have some significant common ground here. For one thing, we now seem to share a conception of the moral as having to do, at least primarily, with how we deal with others: not harming them, not treating them unfairly, being kind to them, and so on. We also agree on the importance of caring. As I would put it: moral reasons are beliefs about what one ought to do (or not do) that are by themselves causally inert. Beliefs require desires in order to result in actions. I can believe that I ought to be kind to my friend, but nothing will flow from that belief unless I care about doing what I ought. So where do we differ? As far as I can see, for de Sousa, what is both necessary and sufficient is that I care about my friend, whereas I would add to this my caring about doing for them what I believe I ought.

Let us explore this a bit more carefully. Suppose that my friend has had a setback and is feeling down. I decide to drop by for a visit to cheer him up. This is something I am motivated to do, just because I care about him and do not like to see him so dejected. But I also think that this is what I ought to do, because it is the kind or decent thing. Now I have a second motivation for doing the same thing. I am not sure why we would want to reject this picture: aren't two motives for doing a good thing better than one? The added moral motive might seem redundant here (which I take to be de Sousa's point), but it also might not be. I might have to fight busy peak hour traffic to get to my friend's house, something I hate doing. If my only care is for my friend, that might not be sufficient by itself to get me behind the wheel. But if I also think that this is something I really ought to do, and if I care about doing the right thing, then the added motivation may be enough to get me over the threshold.

The important, nay indispensable, role of moral motivation comes into clearest view when we lack the corresponding desire. A lot of things we ought to do are just not independently appealing to

[12]Cf. de Sousa (2024, p. 178): "There are only wants all the way down (Or up)."

[13]de Sousa (2024, p. 127): "After you discard morality, most of your reasons may remain the same, but you will have removed the distortions that morality imposed on their relative weights." Cf. de Sousa (2024, p. 165): "The amoralist is no less likely than the moralist to seek and promote much of what the latter profess to value—kindness, justice, and equality, or the wellbeing of others."

https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2026.10078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

us. I know I ought to volunteer at the polling station on election day, but I also know that the day will be long and boring and I just do not want to. I am not going to end up there unless I care about doing my civic duty just because it is my duty. Being a moralist presumably means, among other things, caring about doing one's duty. That kind of caring may sometimes be all we have got.

I applaud the fact that de Sousa independently wants to do all the things that moral norms would tell him he ought to do. But not all agents are in this fortunate position, and some will need the added push provided by moral reasons. We could also ask how he got to this point where his desires are nicely aligned with moral reasons without ever engaging in any moral thinking. Not all moral questions have easy answers; many, perhaps most, require adjudicating conflicts among competing norms or values and deciding hard questions like whether it is always worse to do harm than to allow it to happen, or worse to intend harm than merely foresee it. (And, anyway, what exactly constitutes harm?) Besides engaging in the grand theory-building that de Sousa so disparages, trying to find a way through these complex ethical issues is what moral philosophers actually spend most of their time doing. There is, for instance, an extensive bioethical literature dealing with controversial moral issues, including both abortion and medically assisted death. I cannot imagine anyone contributing to this literature without engaging explicitly with the moral reasons on both sides of these debates. If de Sousa knows a shortcut to the right answers that avoids this kind of intricate ethical argumentation, I sure wish he would share it.

If you believe, as de Sousa does, that practical reasons are ultimately grounded in desires, then how can you be content with the desires you happen to have at any given time and not ask which ones you should have, or which a conscientious person would have? This step into the normative is not, by the way, unique to morality: you can equally ask yourself which prudential rules, or aesthetic standards, or religious principles, or economic values you ought to accept or live by. De Sousa's objection, it seems to me, is not specifically to the normativity of morality, but to normativity itself (de Sousa, 2024, p. 131). It is to the raising of "ought" questions concerning our desires or reasons in any domain, moral or otherwise, rather than simply getting on with the ones we happen to have.

Part of the problem here, I think, is that de Sousa focuses exclusively on the first-personal standpoint in morality, where the question is always *what to do*, and therefore what reasons to act on. But this focus neglects the third-personal stance that consists in evaluating actions or states of affairs (including one's own actions) by means of moral categories. Like everyone else, I sometimes face situations where I need to make a moral decision. But most of my moral practice consists not in deciding what to do but in trying to figure out what to think about the actions of others or the state of the world: how should I respond to the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the deportation of immigrants to dangerous parts of the world, or the killing of civilians in military campaigns? It is unclear to me what an amoralist puts in place of this dimension of the moral life. Is the idea that these phenomena are to be assessed in terms of some normative category other than the moral? If so, which one? Or is it that we are not to raise these evaluative or normative questions at all, instead getting by with—what? What we want or care about? How can a thinking person not consider that there might be some things they do not care about, but should, or do care about, but should not? How can a thinking person aware of the world around them not apply to it moral categories like fair/unfair, just/unjust, or good old-fashioned right/wrong?

6. Concluding Summary

We should be grateful to Ronald de Sousa for raising this challenge against morality, for it compels us to examine, and find a way to support, our otherwise complacent assumption that addressing the world with moral categories in mind, and applying these categories to our own actions, is a worthwhile, or productive, thing to do. It also compels us to ask what exactly is distinctive about those categories—how the domain of the moral is to be distinguished from neighboring normative territories and why it might be important.

https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2026.10078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In the end, however, I am left doubting not only whether de Sousa's amoralism is defensible, or desirable, but whether it is even a humanly possible way of life.

Wayne Sumner is University Professor Emeritus in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Toronto. His professional teaching and research have focused on ethical theory, applied ethics (especially bioethics), political philosophy, and philosophy of law. He has published eight books, six in these philosophical areas and two in legal history. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and recipient of the 2009 Molson Prize in Social Sciences and Humanities from the Canada Council for the Arts.

References

Baier, K. (1958). *The moral point of view*. Cornell University Press.

Birnbacher, D. (2015). Why be moral--a pseudo-problem? In B.Himmelman & R. B.Louden (Eds.), *Why be moral?* (pp. 13–29). De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110366396-003

de Sousa, R.. 2019. "Pour un Amoralisme: Une Polémique. Coda sous Forme de dialogue entre un Amoraliste et un moralist Minimale." *Les Ateliers de l'Éthique* 14(1): 172–189.

de Sousa, R.. (2021). "Forget Morality." Aeon, 23 July.

de Sousa, R.. (2024). *Why it's OK to be Amoral*. Routledge.

Deigh, J. (2010). *An introduction to ethics*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511750519

Frankena, W. K. (1966). The concept of morality. *Journal of Philosophy*, 63(21), 688–696. https://doi.org/10.2307/2024163

Gert, B. (2005). *Morality: Its nature and justification* (Rev ed.). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/0195176898.001.0001

Gert, J., and Gert, B.. 2025. The definition of morality. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy* (Spring 2025 ed.), edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-definition/

Hare, R. M. (1963). *Freedom and reason*. Oxford University Press.

Hare, R. M. (1981). *Moral thinking*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/0198246609.001.0001

Himmelman, B., & Louden, R. B. (Eds.). (2015). *Why be moral?* De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110366396

Kagan, S. (2023). *Answering moral skepticism*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197688977.001.0001

Naughton, J. (2021). Want to save the Earth? Then do not buy that shiny new iPhone. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/sep/18/want-to-save-the-earth-then-dont-buy-that-shiny-new-iphone. Accessed 19/09/21.

Prichard, H. A. (1912). Does moral philosophy rest on a mistake? *Mind*, XXI(81), 21–37. https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/XXI.81.21

Schaber, P. (2015). Why be moral: A meaningful question? In B.Himmelman & R. B.Louden (Eds.), *Why be moral?* (pp. 31–41). De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110366396-004

Sidgwick, H. (1907). *The methods of ethics, seventh edition*. Macmillan and Co.

Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2016). The disunity of morality. In S. M.Liao (Ed.), *Moral brains: The neuroscience of morality* (pp. 331–354). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199357666.003.0015

Thornton, J. C. (1970). Can the moral point of view be justified? In K.Pahel & M.Schiller (Eds.), *Readings in contemporary ethical theory* (pp. 442–453). Prentice-Hall.

Toulmin, S. (1950). *An examination of the place of reason in ethics*. Cambridge University Press.

Cite this article: Sumner, W. 2026. Defending Morality. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 56: e32, 1–9, doi:10.1017/can.2026.10078

https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2026.10078 Published online by Cambridge University Press