From Oughtness to Order-How morals become norms.

Vidyadhar Tilak

How morals become norms.

Abstract

Human thought and behaviour are shaped not only by what is logically true or empirically established, but also by what is considered right, appropriate, or necessary. This essay examines the generation and justification of morals and norms as two interdependent layers of the architecture of value. Morals emerge within the individual as personal commitments grounded in biological predispositions, cultural transmission, cognitive maturation, and reflective reasoning. Norms emerge when shared moral commitments stabilise into socially expected patterns, institutionalised structures, and lasting cultural practices. Together, they create the dual system of "oughtness": one internal and personal, the other external and collective. By integrating insights from evolutionary psychology, cultural anthropology, philosophy, sociology, and systems thinking, this essay presents a unified model for understanding how moral judgement and normative structure co-evolve and regulate human life. The essay concludes by situating morals and norms within the Pragmasophic Knowledge Quad (Truth, Fact, Moral, Norm) as necessary foundations for wise governance, societal flourishing, and future ethical artificial agents.

Introduction

Every action occurs within an evaluative frame. We do not simply describe the world; we ask how we ought to behave within it. Even in routine moments—whether to share, to conceal, to help, to take advantage, or to tell an uncomfortable truth—there lies a structure of value.

This structure begins as **personal oughtness**: an internal sense that some actions are worthy, unacceptable, noble, harmful, or obligatory. Over time, as similar convictions are shared across a community, they crystallise into **social expectations**. These expectations mature into rules, customs, ethics, codes, and laws—together forming **social order**.

In the Pragmasophic architecture, morals and norms belong to the value half of the Knowledge Quad. Truth and fact tell us what *is*. Morals and norms tell us what *should be done*. Yet morals and norms are not separate domains; they are two layers of the same evolving system of value. Personal morals seed collective norms, and societal norms reshape emerging moral reasoning. The evolution of humanity can be read, in part, as the interplay between these two forces.

This essay presents the full fusion model: how morals arise, how norms emerge from them, how both are justified, and how they co-evolve across history and generations.

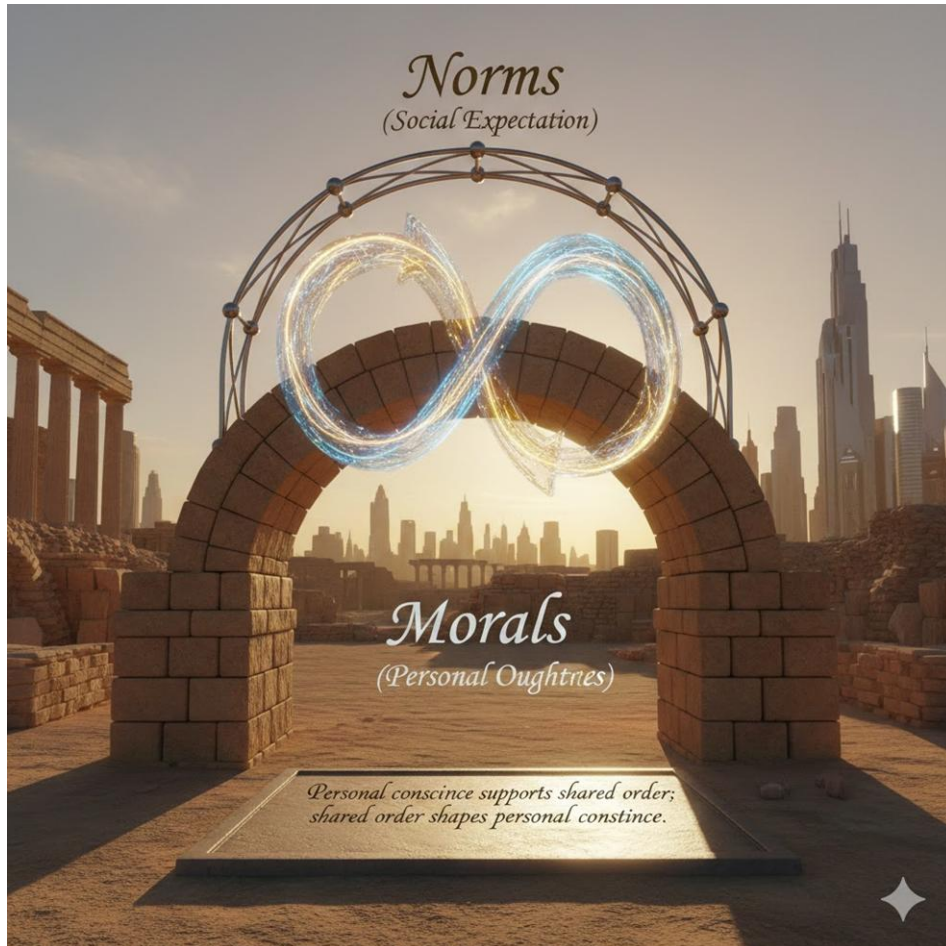## Section 1 — The Architecture of Oughtness

Figure 1: The Architecture of Oughtness

Morals and norms form a dual-layer value system. **Morals** are personal evaluations grounded in conscience and identity. They carry the experience of "I ought". **Norms** are shared expectations grounded in social processes. They express "We do this here".

The distinction lies in the locus of authority. Morals derive from inner conviction. Norms derive from collective convergence. Yet the boundary is not absolute. When a society praises honesty long enough, individuals may internalise honesty as a personal moral value. Equally, when enough individuals reject an outdated moral belief, the surrounding norm dissolves. Oughtness is therefore neither purely individual nor purely collective: it is relational and dynamic.

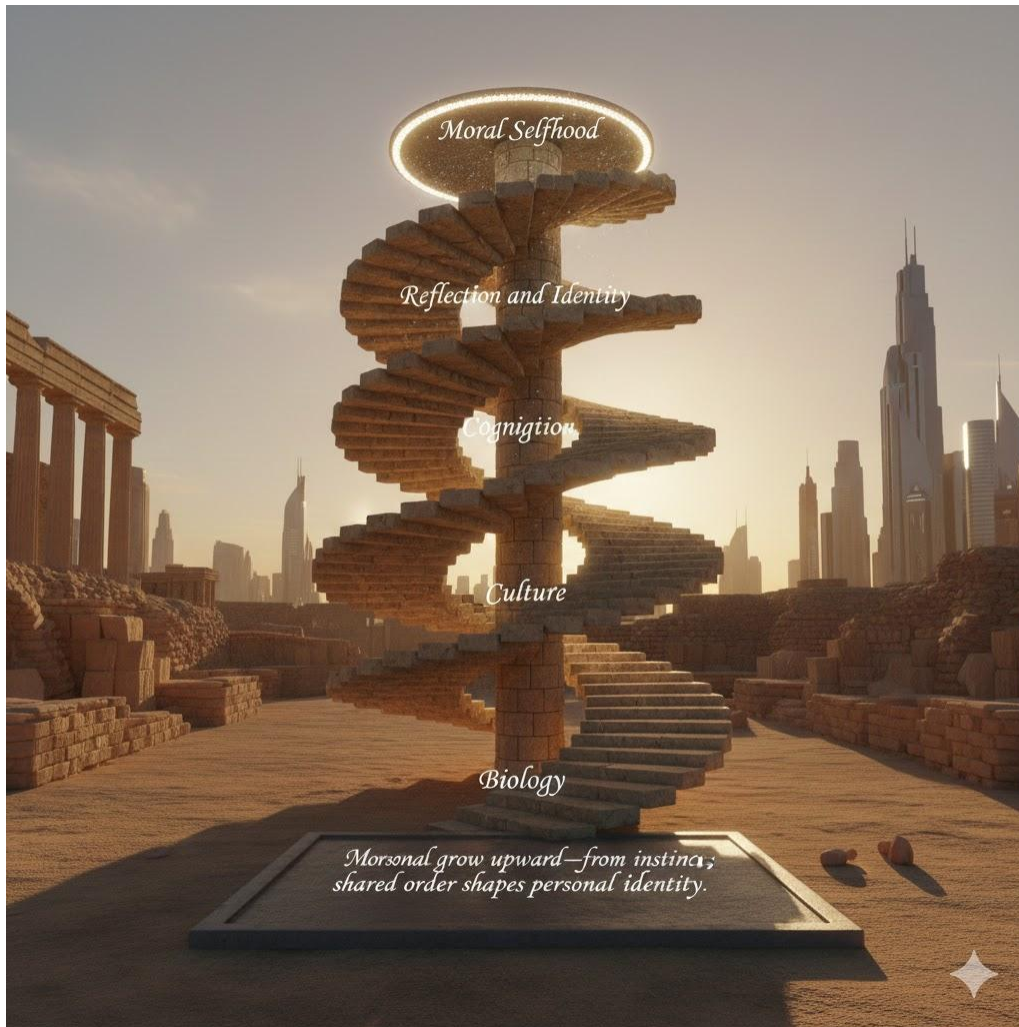
Section 2 — The Emergence of Morals

Figure 2: The Emergence of Morals

Morals do not arise suddenly, nor are they handed to the individual as a ready-made structure. They unfold gradually as the individual develops the ability to feel, interpret, evaluate, and eventually reason about behaviour. Their emergence can be understood as a layered developmental process in which biological predispositions, cultural patterning, cognitive maturation, and reflective experience intertwine.

At the earliest stage, biology prepares the foundation. Human beings are *evolutionarily* shaped for cooperation, attachment, fairness, and empathy. Neural systems such as mirror mechanisms, reward pathways, and emotional circuits predispose infants to respond to others with resonance rather than indifference. These predispositions are not yet morals in the philosophical sense, yet they form the emotional grammar from which moral meanings later

emerge. The child who becomes distressed when another child cries is already demonstrating a pre-moral responsiveness that evolution has woven deeply into the nervous system.

Culture enters next and provides form and content. The child encounters moral meaning long before understanding moral reasoning. Language, gesture, ritual, correction, praise, story, and imitation demonstrate what counts as kindness and what counts as harm. Parents model generosity: elders embody dignity; religious or cultural narratives encode expectations through metaphor and memory. In this phase, moral behaviour appears largely as compliance; the child follows expectations because that is how belonging works. Yet repetition, guidance, and emotional tone gradually convert external discipline into internal familiarity. Culture becomes the first sculptor of personal moral orientation.

With cognitive development, moral experience shifts in character. The child, and later the adolescent, develops the capacity for abstraction. He or she no longer asks merely, "What must I do?", but begins asking, "Why should I do this at all?" Principles, consequences, rights, duties, and identities emerge as *objects of reflection* rather than unquestioned background assumptions. At this stage, morality transitions from imitation to discernment. The self becomes capable of moral authorship rather than simple moral inheritance.

Finally, reflection, identity, and lived emotion refine moral commitment. Real life becomes the teacher. Gratitude may deepen an appreciation for kindness; betrayal may reinforce a commitment to honesty; regret may teach humility faster than instruction ever could. Over time, certain values are no longer merely rules or teachings; they become traits of self-understanding. When an individual says, "I could have acted differently, but this is who I choose to be," morality has become integrated with identity. Morals at this point are not merely beliefs or obligations—they are part of personhood.

Morals can be understood through two lenses: *Ethical* and *Pragmatic*. Ethical morals are often viewed as fixed, abstract principles based on duty and universal rules, where the rightness of an action is inherent in the act itself, irrespective of the outcome (e.g., believing lying is always wrong). Conversely, pragmatic morals treat moral rules as flexible tools or hypotheses for successfully resolving real-world problems. They judge the morality of an action by its consequences and its effectiveness in promoting social harmony or well-being, suggesting that the "right" action is the one that works best in a specific context.
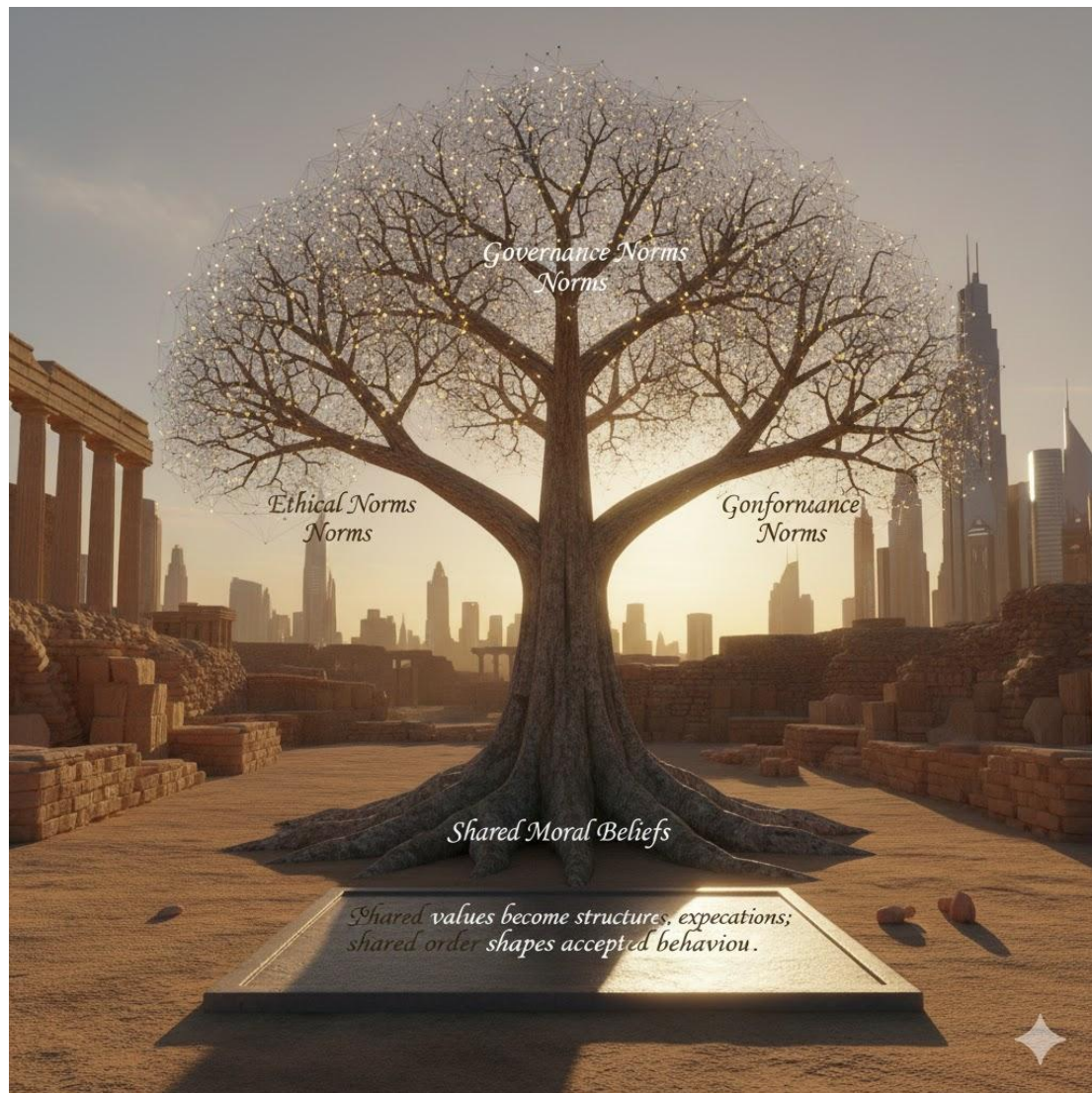
Section 3 — The Emergence of Norms

Figure 3: The Emergence of Norms

Where morals originate inside individuals, norms emerge across communities. A norm comes into being when moral intuitions, habits, and expectations cease to belong to individuals alone and become part of a shared social understanding. *Norms therefore function as the behavioural memory of a society*, encoding what has proven fair, safe, workable, or dignifying across generations.

The first kind of norm to stabilise in a society is the *ethical* norm. These represent the shared articulation of virtues such as honesty, dignity, generosity, and fairness. Ethical norms are transmitted through the same cultural channels that shape personal morality—storytelling, religion, civic teaching, and example—but differ in that they now function as expectations

between persons, not only within the self. They embody what a community believes a decent human life should include and exclude. Ethical norms remain flexible; they evolve as moral understanding deepens. The global recognition of human rights or the decline of caste and race hierarchies illustrate how ethical norms can shift in response to moral insight.

Governance norms arise at a later evolutionary stage when ethical expectations become formalised and enforceable. They appear in constitutions, legal systems, policies, and institutional frameworks. Governance norms transform ethical ideals into duty-bearing structures where consequences attach to compliance or violation. They do not replace ethical norms, but provide society with clarity, predictability, and enforceability. Courts, parliaments, regulatory bodies, and international agreements become guardians of such norms. Governance norms embody society's commitment to stable coexistence, fairness, and accountability.

Alongside these formal structures exist *conformance norms*: the unwritten grammar of daily behaviour. These norms guide coordination rather than righteousness. Queueing at a ticket counter, lowering one's voice in a library, dressing appropriately in public or professional space—these are not matters of moral heroism or legal obligation, but of collective convenience and shared expectation. Their enforcement is subtle, relying on disapproval, awkwardness, humour, or correction. Yet they hold significant power because they make social life smooth, predictable, and friction reduced.

Over time, ethical conviction, legal codification, and behavioural coordination interact to produce a layered normative environment in which human beings learn how to live together. Norms therefore map the space between what individuals believe ought to happen and what societies require to function.

Less common are the aesthetic norms. *Aesthetical norms* are the conventions, standards, or principles we use to evaluate the aesthetic value of objects and experiences, encompassing concepts like beauty, elegance, harmony, and taste. Unlike moral rules, these norms are generally seen as non-compulsory; deviations are considered poor taste or unconventional, not morally wrong. They serve to guide judgments within a specific cultural or artistic context, helping us distinguish the beautiful from the ugly, but they do not impose a moral duty on behavior outside the appreciation of art and beauty itself. Do aesthetic morals, where moral rightness is judged by criteria of beauty or harmony, truly exist?

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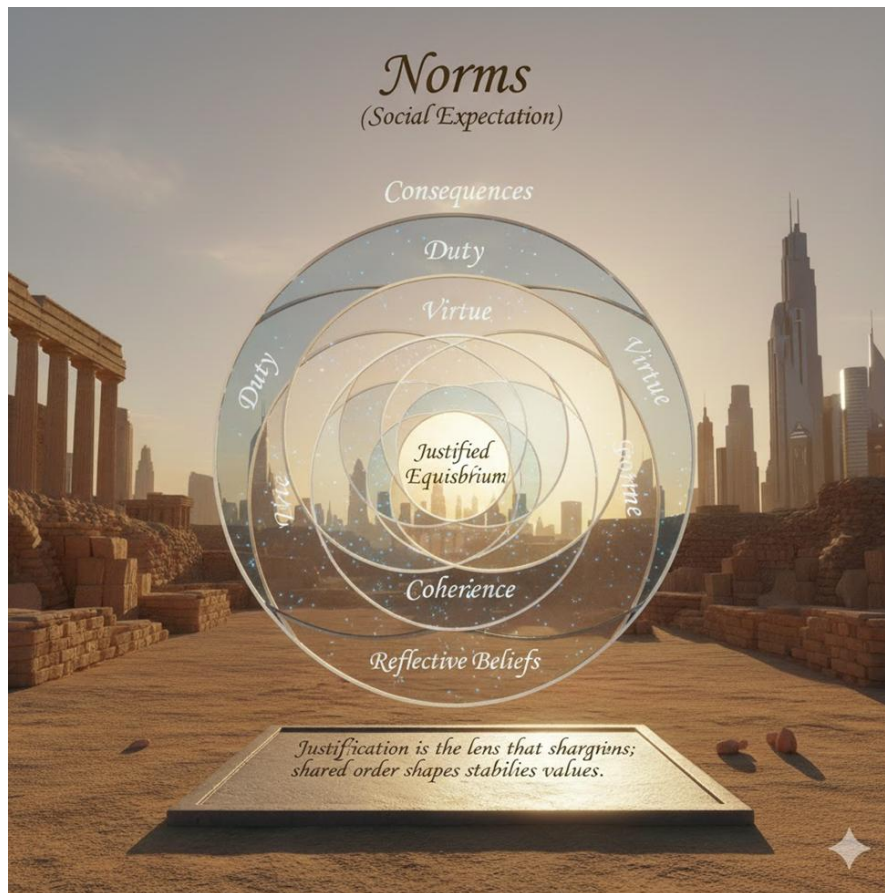
Section 4 — Justifying Morals and Norms

Figure 4: Justifying Morals and Norms

A moral or norm survives not only because it is practised, but because it can be defended. Justification transforms behaviour into commitment, expectation into principle, and tradition into reason. Across civilisations, five enduring modes of justification have guided both personal morality and normative structures.

The first is consequence-based justification, where actions and rules are assessed by their effects. A value is defended because it reduces harm, supports well-being, or benefits the greater number. This reasoning shapes public health laws, environmental ethics, and many personal dilemmas where outcomes rather than loyalty to rule determine what feels right.

In contrast, duty-based justification holds that some actions are right not because of their effects, but because they express intrinsic principles such as dignity, fairness, reciprocity, or autonomy. A society that insists on due process even for those accused of wrongdoing acts from deontic justification. Here, value expresses commitment rather than convenience.

Virtue-based justification shifts attention to character. Instead of asking "What should I do?" or "What will happen if I do it?", one asks, "Who am I becoming through this action?" Virtue reasoning evaluates behaviour by whether it fosters qualities such as honesty, courage, compassion, or wisdom. It connects morality to flourishing and frames ethics as self-cultivation rather than rule compliance.

A fourth mode, coherence-based justification, addresses the internal structure of a moral or normative system. A belief or rule must fit harmoniously with other beliefs, values, and practices. Contradictions weaken legitimacy. A society that claims equality while tolerating systemic discrimination eventually faces moral dissonance that demands revision.

Finally, reflective equilibrium represents the most mature form of justification. It does not privilege principle, consequence, identity, or coherence alone but seeks a balance among them. Reflexive revision, humility, and responsiveness allow values to grow alongside knowledge, context, and experience. In this mode, moral and normative systems remain living rather than fixed—available for re-examination when new understanding emerges.
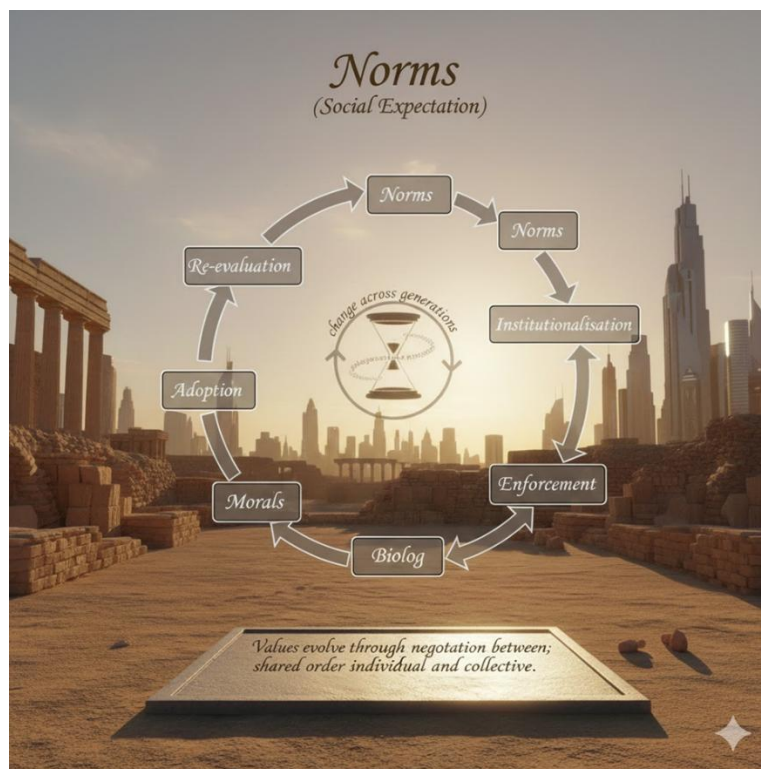
Section 5 — The Co-Evolution Cycle

Figure 5: The Co-Evolution Cycle

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Morals and norms are not static entities. They evolve through a reciprocal feedback loop. Individuals generate moral ideas; societies test, scale, stabilise, or resist them. Meanwhile, societies teach, enforce, and transmit norms, which reshape the moral outlook of new generations. This reciprocal movement is one of the most defining features of civilisation.

Moral change frequently begins as a minority conviction. At first it may be dismissed as eccentric, inconvenient, or threatening. Over time, if the moral insight resonates with lived human experience, it gains supporters. What begins as individual conscience becomes public debate. As acceptance spreads, language shifts, behaviour adjusts, and collective sensibilities evolve. Eventually, a threshold is crossed at which the moral conviction ceases to be an aspiration and becomes a shared expectation—a norm.

Once a norm stabilises, society institutionalises it through governance. This stage provides durability across geography, time, and community boundaries. Schools teach the value, courts defend it, and public discourse assumes it. Children encountering the rule later assume it has always been there, though history remembers its struggle.

Yet no norm is eternal. When a new generation acquires knowledge the previous generation lacked—scientific, sociological, experiential, ecological—existing norms may clash with emerging moral insight. The result may be friction, protest, reform movements, or philosophical reconsideration. If the new moral insight proves more coherent, humane, or functional, norms gradually shift again. Progress, in this sense, has no final endpoint; it is the ongoing negotiation between individuality and collectivity.

Recapitulation

The journey from personal oughtness to social order reveals a continuous evolutionary arc rather than two separate domains of value. Morals begin as internal commitments shaped by biology, culture, cognition, and reflection. They arise first as felt responses, then as learned expectations, and finally as principled identity. When these personal convictions become widely shared and socially reinforced, they transform into norms—collective expectations regulating how a community behaves, governs, and coexists.

Seen through the Pragmasophic lens, morals and norms do not stand alone; they occupy two quadrants of the broader Knowledge Snippet (KS) framework, alongside truth and fact. Truth

and fact constitute the verity dimension—revealing how the world is and how it can be known. Morals and norms constitute the Value dimension—guiding how the world should be lived and how agency should be exercised. Together, these four elements form the epistemic–axiological structure within which human reasoning and human societies operate.

Within this integrated frame, morals correspond to KS–M, representing internal evaluative judgement and personal commitment. Norms correspond to KS–N, representing externalised, socially coordinated value expectations. Their interaction forms a feedback system: individual moral reflection can eventually reshape collective norms, just as prevailing norms can reinforce, constrain, or challenge emerging personal morality. When individuals live within a normative system without reflection, they inherit values; when they reflect, interrogate, and sometimes resist, they participate in the refinement of values.

This co-evolution of morality and normativity ensures that the Knowledge Snippet system remains dynamic rather than static. It enables societies to preserve stability while allowing revision when insight, evidence, or experience reveal new ethical realities. In this way, morals and norms function not as fixed rules but as adaptive and evolving components of human meaning-making. Their role in the Knowledge Snippet architecture prepares the ground for future inquiry into how value systems govern action, how prudence guides choice, and how wise agents—human or artificial—may one day participate in shaping a more just, compassionate, and coherent social world.

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Technical Terms

Term	Short Description
Coherence Justification	A mode of moral and normative justification where a belief or rule is defended based on its harmonious fit and consistency with an individual's worldview or a society's existing values and practices.
Conformance Norms	Pragmatic, unwritten social standards that regulate everyday behaviour (e.g., queueing or punctuality) to ensure coordination, reduce friction, and increase predictability in daily life.
Consequential Justification	A mode of moral and normative justification where an action or rule is assessed as right based on its favourable outcomes or effects, such as reducing harm, supporting well-being, or maximizing utility.
Deontic Justification	A mode of moral and normative justification emphasizing intrinsic principles, duties, and rules; an action is right because it follows an endorsed principle, regardless of its outcomes.
Ethical Norms	The shared, collectively accepted expressions of moral values (e.g., honesty, dignity, fairness) that guide a society's vision of good conduct and humane interaction.
Fact (Verity Space / Epistemic)	An epistemic entity that concerns the state of the world and reflects actuality, providing the empirical foundation for truths and effective norms.
Governance Norms	The formal, enforceable structures that form the legal and regulatory backbone of social order, including constitutions, laws, institutional policies, rights, and duties.
Holons (Norms as Emergent)	A conceptual model in Pragmasophy depicting norms as emergent entities in the social space, which branch into the three categories: ethical, governance, and conformance norms.

Term	Short Description
KS–M (Personal Moral Dimension)	The quadrant of the Knowledge Snippet (KS) framework that represents internal evaluative judgement and personal moral commitment ("I ought").
KS–N (Social Normative Dimension)	The quadrant of the Knowledge Snippet (KS) framework that represents externalised, socially coordinated value expectations and obligations ("We do this here").
Knowledge Snippet (KS) Framework	The unified epistemic-normative structure in Pragmasophy that integrates four core entities: Truth, Fact (Verity/Epistemic) and Moral, Norm (Value/Axiological).
Moral (KS–M)	Individual-level prescriptions or commitments that guide personal conduct and conscience, reflecting what a person believes ought to be done.
Norms (KS–N)	Socially shared prescriptions or expectations that regulate behaviour in recurrent situations, arising from the aggregation and stabilization of individual morals.
"Oughtness" (Personal Oughtness)	The internal sense or felt obligation that guides behaviour; the core personal experience that some actions are worthy, unacceptable, or obligatory.
Reflective Equilibrium	The most mature form of justification, involving the examination of conflicting intuitions, principles, and consequences to find a balanced, reasoned, and nuanced moral or normative stance.
Social Order	The resultant structure of rules, customs, ethics, codes, and laws that forms when similar moral convictions are shared and stabilize into social expectations.
Truth (Verity Space / Epistemic)	An epistemic entity that concerns validity within a model and reflects correctness, used to guide the justification of governance norms (e.g., evidence-based policy).
Value Dimension (Axiological)	The sphere of the Knowledge Quad (Moral and Norm) that is concerned with guiding how the world should be lived and how agency should be exercised.
Verity Dimension (Epistemic)	The sphere of the Knowledge Quad (Truth and Fact) that is concerned with revealing how the world is and how it can be known.
Virtue-Based Justification	A mode of justification that focuses on the cultivation of moral character (e.g., compassion, courage, honesty) rather than merely judging individual acts or their consequences.

Annexure

Human Rights and Duties: A UNESCO-Based Perspective

Since its foundation in 1945, UNESCO has placed the defence of human dignity, freedom, and justice at the core of its mission. The notion that every human being is entitled to basic, universal rights — irrespective of culture, nationality, religion or other status — lies at the heart of its commitment.

1. Foundations: Universal Human Rights

One of the landmark instruments anchoring human rights globally is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948). The Declaration proclaims a broad array of civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights — including life, liberty, security, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom from torture and slavery, equal protection under the law, right to education, and the right to participate in cultural and scientific life.

In UNESCO's interpretation and programming, these rights are considered universal, indivisible, interdependent and inalienable. For example, the right to education is not merely a privilege but a fundamental human entitlement — essential for the realisation of other rights and for human development.

Moreover, UNESCO extends human-rights protection into emerging domains: the ethics of science, bioethics, genetic research, cultural diversity, freedom of expression, media independence, and access to scientific progress and information. Thus, within a modern globalising world, human rights provide the baseline moral and normative standards that all individuals and societies should respect.

2. Duties and Responsibilities: The Counterpart of Rights

Where rights assert what individuals are entitled to, duties and responsibilities define what individuals, communities, and states owe — in return. Rights without duties risk degenerating into entitlement without responsibility, social fragmentation, and conflict.

Though international human rights instruments emphasise rights, they also implicitly and explicitly recognize that these rights carry corresponding duties. For instance, Article 29 of the UDHR mentions that "everyone has duties to the community … in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible."

Over time, various thinkers and institutions have proposed more explicit affirmations of human duties. The Universal Declaration of Human Duties and Responsibilities (a normative but not universally ratified document) argues that the enjoyment of rights must be balanced by responsibilities — at individual, communal, institutional, and state levels.

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In this perspective, duties include respect for others' dignity and rights, non-discrimination, protection of life and environment, fairness, solidarity, promotion of social justice, and active participation in sustaining a just social order.

UNESCO's programs echo this view: human rights education, cultural respect, scientific responsibility and ethics, and promotion of peaceful coexistence all emphasise responsibilities as well as entitlements.

Hence, in a robust value-norm architecture, rights and duties are two sides of the same coin.

3. Rights, Duties, and the Pragmasophic Framework

In the schema of Pragmasophy, human rights correspond well to the **"Moral / Norm"** quadrants of the Knowledge Snippet architecture: they represent value claims that should universally govern human action. But for those rights to become stable norms — enforceable, respected, internalised — corresponding duties must be recognised and institutionalised.

- Personal Moral Dimension (KS–M): An individual's conviction that "every human being deserves dignity, freedom, respect, justice."
- Social Normative Dimension (KS–N)**:** Institutional laws, international agreements, educational systems, and social customs that embody those convictions into collective expectations and obligations.

Thus, human rights and human duties are not optional ethical flourishes — they are structural components of a stable, just, and compassionate social order. Rights assert what is due; duties commit agents to uphold and respect that due.

In societies where rights are enshrined but duties ignored — where entitlement lacks responsibility — the social order becomes fragile. Conversely, when duties are emphasised without recognition of rights, institutions risk authoritarianism or collective suppression. The balance is essential.

4. UNESCO's Role: Education, Culture, Science, Communication

UNESCO plays a pivotal role in translating human rights and duties into living social reality. Its founding constitution prioritises promoting peace and security through "education, science and culture" so as to "further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for human rights and fundamental freedoms."

Through constant programmes — human rights education initiatives, cultural diversity advocacy, promotion of scientific ethics (bioethics, genetic data, responsible research), and

support for freedom of expression — UNESCO attempts to strengthen both rights and corresponding duties across nations.

This approach mirrors the co-evolutionary model of moral & normative systems in Pragmasophy: individuals educated in human rights become committed agents; such commitment, when widely shared, becomes social norm; institutions codify and enforce; the cycle continues as new generations internalise both rights and responsibilities.

5. Challenges and Imperatives: From Norm to Practice

Recognition of human rights and duties does not guarantee realisation. Many societies still suffer from inequality, discrimination, rights violations, lack of access to education, injustice, and violations of dignity. The existence of formal rights declarations is necessary but not sufficient.

To ensure that rights become lived reality requires: moral commitment on the part of individuals; normative strength in social institutions; enforcement mechanisms; and continuous reflection and revision. Duties must be accepted not as impositions but as shared responsibility. Education, cultural dialogue, scientific integrity, and respect for diversity become essential.

Moreover, rapid technological advances (in genetics, AI, information technology) create new fronts where human dignity and rights must be defended — and new responsibilities acknowledged. In this context, the normative framework must remain dynamic and adaptable. UNESCO's declarations on bioethics, data, science, and cultural diversity point toward this ongoing requirement.

Thus, embedding human rights and duties within the Pragmasophic Knowledge-Norm architecture is not a theoretical luxury, but an existential necessity for any humane civilisational project.