

Morality and the Azerbaijani Attitude Toward Armenians

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Anyone who accepts moral norms toward one person must apply them to all people, and therefore it is immoral to exclude any group of people, such as Armenians, for example. That is to say, if a person accepts beliefs such as “it is not permissible to kill a child” or “it is not permissible to abuse a prisoner of war” as their personal moral norms, but does not apply them to Armenians, then that person is behaving immorally in those cases. The moment that person excludes Armenians, it becomes clear that, from the start, they had never adopted the above norms as personal moral norms. In other words, the beliefs that “it is not permissible to kill a child” or “it is not permissible to abuse a prisoner of war” were never moral norms in that person’s eyes. To explain this conclusion, first the terms must be clarified. In order to distinguish personal moral norms from others, it is necessary to examine the types of human behavior, for which I will look first at the collective and then at the individual type.^[1] In explaining the different types of behavior, I will not take examples from Azerbaijani-Armenian relations, but rather from unrelated matters, so that the classification will be clear to the reader. After clarifying all the necessary terms, I will return to the main topic – the attitude toward Armenians.

Collective behaviors refer to behaviors exhibited by a specific group of people. Collective behaviors can be both *independent* and *interdependent*. Independent collective behaviors are exhibited by people in order to satisfy their own personal interests, and in this case the person does not take into account others’ behavior or others’ expectations of them. For example, an outside observer of Azerbaijani society may see that Hasan, like other people, wears warm clothes in cold weather; dressing warmly when it’s cold is a collective

behavior. What is Hasan's reason for wearing warm clothes? Does Hasan dress warmly so as not to feel cold – to secure his own interests (1), or because other people are dressing warmly (2), or because other people expect Hasan to dress warmly? It is clear that the answer to this question is the first option – what others do and what they expect from Hasan has no effect on his behavior. Therefore his and everyone else's behavior – dressing warmly in cold weather – is independent.

Now imagine that an observer of our society sees young men and women wearing approximately the same kinds of clothes; they conform to a particular style of clothing. For example, for Hasan and others to wear fashionable clothes is a collective behavior: Hasan dresses according to a particular fashion because other people – to be more precise, Hasan's *reference network* – dress according to that fashion. A person's reference network may be their friends or people they consider important and admire. Suppose Hasan chooses middle-class Russian-speaking people who work in high-rise office buildings as his reference network. In this case, the clothing style that Hasan follows will depend on the people in the reference network. Hasan's behavior and that of everyone who dresses in a style that conforms to a particular reference network is not independent.

Examples of collective behaviors which arise out of people's independent behaviors include *habits* and *customs*, while interdependent collective behavior can be exemplified by *fashion* and *traffic rules*. Dressing warmly in cold weather or drinking tea in the morning, as most Azerbaijanis do, are habits, and Hasan will continue to drink tea in the morning, even if no one else does. Dressing warmly in cold weather, meanwhile, is a custom (this is a term coined by Bicchieri, not to be confused with the word *custom* as we use it in everyday language. Here *custom* refers to independent collective behavior). Even if everyone goes outside in the winter in tank tops, Hasan will still wear a jacket. On the other hand, Hasan wears certain brands of shoes and jackets

because the people in his reference network use the same brands. And if no one follows the traffic rules, then Hasan will not follow them either.

But which of the two categories above do social norms and morality belong to? In order to answer that question, let's first look at some types of *preferences*. Preferences can be both personal ("I want to drink black coffee") and social ("I want the value created by collective labor to be shared equally among members"). Social preferences may take into account the behaviors, beliefs, and potential gains of the people considered relevant by the person choosing the preference. Social preferences themselves are either *conditional* or *unconditional*. For example, imagine that Hasan and four others go hunting and kill a wild boar. Hasan's social preference is that the meat of the boar should be divided equally among the five, because (a) Hasan believes that a moral person should share a bounty obtained through joint effort; (b) Hasan believes that the other four believe that a person should share a bounty obtained through joint effort. Thus, in option (a), Hasan comes to his conclusion based on his own moral belief, independent of what the others expect; in option (b) he comes to this conclusion based on the beliefs of others. Thus, in option (a), Hasan's social preference is unconditional; in option (b) it is conditional. Hence, all interdependent collective behaviors include conditional social preferences.

Summarizing the discussion above, we can restate the hunting example as follows:

1. Unconditional individual preference: "I want the boar to be divided equally."

2. Conditional individual preference: "If the other four people will like me for it, I want the boar to be divided equally."

3. Unconditional social preference: "I want to keep half the

boar.”

4. *Conditional social preference*: “If the other four want the boar to be divided equally, I want the boar to be divided equally.”

When Hasan has conditional social preferences, he gives weight to what people in his reference network think or expect from him, so Hasan’s preferences are influenced by his *social expectations*. These social expectations are some of Hasan’s *beliefs*. Beliefs can be *empirical* (factual) or *normative*. For example, Hasan believes that it was colder yesterday than today. This belief is empirical, it is either true or false. At the same time, Hasan believes that his four companions want the boar to be divided equally. This is also an empirical belief, it is either true or false – perhaps Hasan suffered more in the hunt for the wild boar, and the other four people want him to receive a quarter of the wild boar. On the other hand, Hasan believes that a person should keep their word. This is a normative belief, because it contains a moral evaluation – this belief means that Hasan gives a positive evaluation to people who keep their word, he approves of their behavior.

When we observe people’s behavior, we may have certain *empirical social expectations*. For example, Hasan has observed that cars always stop at red lights, and thus he has an empirical social expectation for the future that cars will continue to stop at red lights. And this empirical social expectation affects his behavior: when the light for cars turns red, he crosses the street (I repeat: this empirical expectation is a belief and is either true or false). On the other hand, Hasan has *normative social expectations*; for example, Hasan believes that most people believe that a person should keep their word. This expectation also affects Hasan’s behavior, because if he makes a promise in the future and then decides that he does not want to keep his word, he will know that if he goes back on his promise, people will criticize him

and society will not approve of his behavior.

	Non-social belief	Social belief
Non-normative belief	Empirical belief	Empirical social expectation
Normative belief	Personal normative belief	Normative social expectation

What interests me in this article are personal normative beliefs, because *moral beliefs* are an integral part of just such beliefs. Personal normative beliefs are the ways a person tends to evaluate certain types of behavior. Such beliefs can be expressed as “I like people who keep their word” or “a person should keep their word.” Personal normative beliefs can be both *prudential* and *moral*. When Hasan says “a person should not smoke,” he supports his opinion with the argument that “smoking is harmful to human health,” which is a prudential normative belief. However, if he supports his opinion with the argument that “smoking is *makruh tahrimi*,”^[2] then it is a personal moral normative belief.” Or consider another example: to the question “is it permissible to have sex outside of marriage?” Hasan answered “no,” supporting his response with the argument that “if a person has sex outside of marriage they will eventually get divorced, and a divorced person is unhappy themselves, and the quality of life of their children is decreased, and it sets a bad example for others,” then this is a prudential normative belief. If the same answer were based on the premise that “sexual intercourse outside of marriage, regardless of the outcome, is a breach of the oath of allegiance taken at the time of marriage,” then it would be a personal moral normative belief.

Let’s get back to the Armenians. At the outset, when I said “general moral norms,” I meant my own *normative social expectations*, but I could not immediately state my opinion without explaining that term first. My conclusion from observing people was that *almost everyone in Azerbaijan*

believes that it is not permissible to kill or abuse an innocent person, a child, an elderly person, or a prisoner of war. This was my normative social expectation about Azerbaijani society. I myself also believe that *it is not permissible to kill or abuse innocent people, children, elderly people, and prisoners of war.* This is my personal moral normative belief. If I am not mistaken in my normative social expectations about Azerbaijanis, then Azerbaijanis should not want to kill, expel, or humiliate Armenian children, the elderly, prisoners of war, or civilians. However, since the war began, it has become even more apparent that many people see Armenians as an exception in their personal moral normative beliefs. For example, take a person who says "Armenian children must be killed" (or "Armenians must not leave Karabakh alive"): if we ask them "is it permissible to kill a child" or "is it permissible to kill a civilian," they will quite probably say "no." The person's personal moral normative beliefs do not allow the killing of children and civilians. But if the same person does not apply these principles to Armenians, then they are immoral.

What does it mean to be immoral? Why is a person who makes an exception of Armenians immoral? Everyone's individual moral normative beliefs are applicable by their very nature to all people, and therefore it is impossible to exclude any group. Personal moral normative beliefs such as "it is not permissible to kill a child" apply to all children: to both Azerbaijani and Armenian children. However, if someone says that "Armenian children may be killed," then they have not accepted the idea that "it is not permissible to kill a child" as a personal moral normative belief. This means that the person is immoral – that is to say, they do not recognize a moral value as basic as "it is not permissible to kill a child." In other words, anyone who supports the killing of children, or the killing or expulsion of civilians, is immoral.

Suppose that Hasan is an immoral person in the sense described

above. If we ever ask Hasan, "is it permissible to kill a child?" he will answer "no." If he has not accepted this idea as a personal moral normative belief, then why does he give a negative response to that question? Because Hasan accepts the idea that □□ "it is not permissible to kill a child" as a social normative expectation. *Hasan believes that many people in society believe that it is not permissible to kill a child.* Therefore, Hasan knows that if he answers "yes" to that question, he will be condemned, so he says "no" in order not to be condemned. However, when the same Hasan said during the war that "Armenians must not leave Karabakh alive," he understood that among the people he wanted to kill there were children, elderly people, and civilians. So why would Hasan voice such an opinion? Because *Hasan believes that during the war, many people believe that it is permissible to kill Armenian civilians.* In other words, Hasan's social normative expectation is that if he wants to kill Armenian civilians, many people will not condemn him. Therefore, he does not hesitate to express this opinion. If Hasan is not mistaken in his social normative expectations, it means that many people in this society are immoral, because these people also do not accept the idea that □□ "it is not permissible to kill a child" as a personal moral social belief.

I hope that my social normative belief about Azerbaijanis, and not Hasan's, is true. In other words, I hope that almost all Azerbaijanis believe that children, the elderly, innocent people, civilians, and prisoners of war must not be killed or abused. If you adopted the idea that "X is not permissible" as a personal moral normative belief and then excluded Armenians, then you are immoral, because you have in fact adopted the idea that "X is not permissible" as a social normative belief. You are deceiving yourself, or us, or both yourself and us. Of course, the people who take part in the killing of Azerbaijani children and civilians or in the humiliation of prisoners of war, or who justify these acts or call for them, are also immoral. However, the immorality of others does not justify

your own immorality.

^[1] Throughout the article, all classifications are based on: Bicchieri, Cristina. *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms*. 1st edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.

^[2] *Makruh tahrimi*: an action strongly discouraged in Islam, almost *haram*.

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