

## 'Who Are We to Judge?': Pathologies of Moral Judgement

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### Abstract

This study profiles and peruses different ways of thinking that are pathological to moral judgement. Based on the interviews with respondents who experienced passing and receiving moral judgement as well as conversations with social science and philosophy academics, the study profiles ten pathological attitudes that viewed moral judgment as an exercise in hypocrisy, moral superiority and perfectionism, judgementalism, negativity, interference, moral vagueness, sentimentalism, and profanity. In like manner, those who make moral judgement are stereotyped as hypocrites, judgmental, negative, hostile, arrogant, self-righteous, and intolerant. These negative stereotypes discourage people from engaging in moral judgement in the public sphere. As moral judgement becomes a social pariah, the moral order degenerates, aggravating the culture of moral indifference that characterizes most contemporary societies. Counteracting the phenomenon of moral dissipation entails the emancipation of moral judgement from pathological attitudes. A constructive and responsible exercise of moral judgement is paramount to maintenance of the moral borders and boundaries in society.

**Keywords:** Attitudes, Moral judgement, Moral dissipation, Moral responsibility, Pathologies

### Introduction

Moral judgement occupies a paramount role in moral discourse and praxis. Understood as the evaluation of actions and their consequences, motives, and character as good or bad, right or wrong, beneficial or harmful, virtuous or vicious, moral judgement enables members of society to attribute approval impose moral sanction. Since moral judgement is crucial to moral responsibility, it is vital to the maintenance of the moral borders and boundaries of society (Furedi, 2021).

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Caught in the crossfire of conflicting moral worldviews, such as *moral realism*, the view that posits the existence of objective and universal moral norms (Fischer & Fuchs, 2015); *moral relativism* the belief that teaches morality as dependent upon culture and society (Lukes, 2008); *moral subjectivism* the perspective that regards morality as a matter of individual discretion (Baofu, 2011); *moral skepticism* the doctrine that considers moral knowledge and beliefs as empirically unjustified (Machuca, 2017); *moral nihilism* the philosophy that denies the existence of morality (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2007); and *moral pluralism* the perspective that recognizes the plurality of moral values and norms (Hinman, 2012), moral judgement is under duress.

Moral judgements also mirror the differences of competing theoretical orientations that variously regard morality as duty, divine command, consequences of action, or character. These fundamental disagreements are inevitable, but they mainly affirm the legitimate function of moral judgement rather than repudiate it.

Thinkers have raised the alarm bells over emergent ways of thinking that marginalizes the role of moral judgement in social life. Interrogating the problem of identity, Furedi (2021) sees the devaluation of moral judgement as a symptom of the weakening of the moral foundations of society. The problem of identity is closely associated with the estrangement from moral judgement -a form of moral indifference that manifests a failure to make moral judgement in the face of moral evil. Human life in modernity is floating, rootless, and wasted. The expanding moral vacuum is the price to pay for abandoning the morals of solidarity in favor of technological progress that feeds on commercial logic. Here morality is not only marginalized but is also severed from the evaluation of social issues (Bauman & Donskis, 2013; Juul, 2013; Furedi, 2021).

Society and culture play a significant role in the formation of moral judgement. Turiel (2012) argues that social structure and cultural practices influence how individuals make moral judgements. For instance, in Western and Russian societies, men exhibit a utilitarian orientation in their moral judgement (Arutyunova et al., 2016).

In *Foundations of Morality*, Kupperman (2020) notes that the nineteenth and twentieth century Western society frowned upon moral judgement as moralistic, which explains the shrinkage of its moral sphere. Knox (2015) believes that this cultural attitude is consistent with the phenomenon of moral drift that pervaded the social institutions of the West. In Africa, Samson and Allida (2018) traces the causes of moral decadence among Ugandan high school students to parental inadequacy, social media and the internet technology. Meanwhile, Nigerian educators blame materialism, permissiveness, poor parental and religious formation, and the mass media as the culprit in the moral decadence among secondary school students (Njoku, 2016).

In Asia, scholars fault the Western media as the harbinger of foreign pop culture that threatens the region's morals and values (Otmazgin & Ben-Ari, 2013). Investigating the decline of morality among the youth in the Philippines, Cordero (2013) reveals that inadequate family involvement in the life of the teenagers, social

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pressure, and mass media are the root-cause of moral decline. Benitez (2022a) links the moral problems afflicting Philippine society to colonial and domestic forces that are responsible for the distortion, dysfunctionalization, and ambivalence of Filipino moral norms and values (Benitez, 2022b).

Clearly, the phenomenon of moral dissipation prevailing in many societies across the world is largely due to the marginalization of morality. Since moral judgement is vital to the maintenance of the moral order of society, it is imperative to identify and examine the pathologies that afflict it.

## Methodology

In this paper, I profile and peruse the different attitudes toward moral judgement. The study initially included fifty respondents and four social science and philosophy experts. Due to the redundancy of viewpoints, the respondents dropped to twenty. In the description of the typology of attitudes, R1, R2, R3, to R20 refer to twenty respondents.

The interviews with respondents revolved around questions concerning their feelings, beliefs, and thoughts on their experience of passing and receiving moral judgement. The interview also touched on the consequences of passing and receiving moral judgement. The conversations with experts centered on the experiences and views of the respondents concerning moral judgement. Moreover, I also tapped my own experiences and observations about moral judgement including the information I obtained from social and mass media. The study strictly adhered to research ethics protocols.

The respondents' views on moral judgement serve as basis for the profiling of the different types of attitudes towards moral judgement. The objective of the perusal of these attitudes is to separate those that are consistent with the legitimate function of moral judgement from those are pathological to moral judgement.

## Pathologies of Moral Judgement

The respondents' experiences and views disclosed ways of thinking that are pathological to moral judgement. The following profile consists of ten pathologies of moral judgement. The presentation includes excerpts from the respondents' statements.

**Pathology 1. Moral judgement as personal attack.** This attitude construes moral judgement as personal attack. Those who receive moral judgement take it as personal affront, while others use moral judgement to attack people.

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R8 narrated that she felt insulted by her neighbors who commented on the misbehavior of her children: “I was hurt when our neighbors said that my children are as undisciplined as their parents.” While R8 admitted that some of her children did misbehave, she felt that judging her family was unfair. R15, R20, and R12 related different experiences of being judged, but they all agreed with R8 that moral judgement is offensive. R12, in particular, has no issue with people passing moral judgements as long as the facts are correct: “I was accused of being a ‘*chismosa*’ (gossip) for allegedly for spreading lies about my classmates.” R15 and R20 viewed moral judgement, whether true or false, as painful and harmful to a person’s reputation. R20 admitted that she had wrongly confronted a relative whom she mistook to have spread negative stories about her.

All three respondents, except R12, believed that moral judgement is hurtful regardless of guilt or innocence.

**Pathology 2. Moral judgement as hypocrisy.** This pathology views moral judgement as an exercise in hypocrisy. Anyone who judges is a hypocrite because everyone is morally impaired.

R19 and R6 described people who judge others as morally worse than those refrain from judging. R19 stressed that no one should judge anyone because no one is without fault. R1 admitted his reluctance to judge because he too has moral weakness. “I feel that when I judge others, I am actually judging myself. It makes no difference, for all of us are imperfect.” R1 believed that only hypocrites judge others.

R1, R6 and R19 agreed that judging others is “*nakakahiya*” (shameful). Hypocrisy is an undesirable behavior. The Bible prohibits it. Only God can judge for He alone sees the “*kalooban*” (interiority) of the person.

**Pathology 3. Who are you to judge me?** This pathology asks a rhetorical rather than factual question. There are at least two questions. First, the question on the right to judge. Second, the question on the moral and social status of the one who makes the judgement.

R16 narrated that his family and relatives used to judge him. Although he acknowledged that he had not been doing well in life, he protested, “Who are they to judge me?” R18 said, “My weakness and faults do not give others the right to judge me. People think that because they are educated and rich they already have the right to judge others. People judge me because they think they are better and I am worse. But who was the right to judge?”

R1, R6, R16, R18 and R19 believe that even if some people are morally good, only God has the right to judge.

**Pathology 4. Judge me not for you know me not.** This pathology sets personal knowledge and close relationship as conditions for moral judgement.

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R9 contended that unless we personally know and are close to the person, our judgement will only harm the person. “We cannot judge people for doing something wrong without fully knowing their background and what they’re going through.” R14 decried how people who do not know her and she does not know judge her. “I was depressed, so I deactivated my Facebook account because people said all sorts of bad things about me.”

R7, R9, and R14 rued how people can be so unforgiving yet so ignorant in their judgement. They think that those who know them and are close to them treat them kindly. They however admitted that they have judged some people even if they do not personally know them. R7 digressed claiming that when it comes to public figures, like abusive and corrupt government officials and politicians, people should express their moral outrage in public.

**Pathology 5. Moral judgement as interference (It is none of your business).** This pathology is twofold. Those who pass moral judgement use it as a pretext to interfere, while those who receive moral judgement characterize it as unwelcome interference.

R3, R8, and R12 viewed moral judgement as prying into the lives of other people. For them, judging someone is socially undesirable for it is an act of meddling. People should leave others alone. Reacting to how people judged her, R3 exclaimed, “This is my life. It is none of their business. I do as I please. People who make moral comments about my life are poisonous.” R12 saw those who judge others as restless, bored, and have nothing to do in their life, so they pry into the affairs of other people. Asked if he had ever judged anyone, R8 confessed that he had made judgements on others, “but I do it seriously and do not mean to interfere. I also share my thoughts about other people with my friends.”

R3, R8, R12 explained that if making moral judgement means preventing harm, then it is not necessarily interfering in the business of other people. They also agree that it is all right to judge others as long as they keep their judgement within the circle of friends.

**Pathology 6. Moral judgement as judgementalism.** This pathology ignores the difference between moral judgement and judgementalism.

R2, R5, and R10 all claimed that those who judge others are judgmental, that is, people who are “obsessed with criticizing others in order to embarrass them.” R10 remarked that in her workplace, people who judge others tend to speak ill of almost everyone.

R5 opined that even when some people do something bad, it is best to be compassionate and understanding rather than judgmental. “A friendly smile can do wonders, while judgement can destroy relationships.” R2 described people who make moral judgement as aggressive. “We should show empathy rather

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than judge others and being hostile.” R2, R5, and R10 admitted the possibility of making moral judgement without being hostile, but insisted that most people who pass judgement are judgmental.

**Pathology 7. Moral judgement as perfectionism and superiority.** This pathology views those who make moral judgement as claiming to be morally perfect and superior.

R7 found himself in a difficult situation. “I am conflicted because while I strongly feel against people’s wrongdoings, I am also ashamed of my own mistakes even if they are not as grave.” R13 disliked people who make moral judgements because all of them are imperfect. “People rant on social media about moral corruption forgetting that they are no better. The more morally corrupt they are, the greater the urge to judge others. These people are morally pathetic!”

R20 adopted a religious tone, “Rather than judge others, we must invite them to repent and change their ways. Judgement antagonizes people, but preaching love sanctifies our neighbors.” R7, R13, and R20 believed that people who pass moral judgement think of themselves as morally perfect when they are actually not.

**Pathology 8. Moral judgement as negativism** (You are too negative). This pathology regards people who make moral judgement as negative.

R9, R15, and R20 believed that moral judgement is nothing but an exercise in negativism. R9 and R15 held that people who make moral judgement are either “envious of our success or they are just too miserable that they feel the need to judge.” R20 affirmed her moral imperfections but she disapproved of people who make moral judgement “for focusing on the dark side and failing to see the positive in us.” R15 suspected that people who judge others are full of hate and misery, that the only way to relieve their burdens is to judge other people. R19 averred that those who make moral judgements are “actually projecting their own negativity on others.”

**Pathology 9. Moral judgement as profanity.** This pathology likens moral judgement to profanity or a pretext to assault people verbally.

R11 and R25 lamented their teacher’s profanity-laced tirades against them due to their failure to comply with academic requirements on time. Despite humbly admitting their fault and profusely apologizing, they were humiliated in front of their classmates. “We would have not minded being reprimanded, but the hurtful language hurled against us had really traumatized us.”

R11 observed sports celebrities and public officials use profanities in public. R12 recalled how she cringed every time a high-ranking government official used foul language in his public addresses.

**Pathology 10. Moral judgement as seems/feels like.** This pathology reduces the certitude of moral judgment to ambiguity and sentimentalism.

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R4 abashedly admitted that she often uses the expressions “seems/feels like” even when she speaks about things that are distinctly clear. “I would say cutting classes seems or feels like wrong.” She explained though that despite those expressions, she really meant that cutting classes was certainly wrong. R17 stated, “While I strongly believe and feel that some acts are clearly wrong, other people may not have the same judgement that’s why I used the expressions ‘feels/seems like’ out of respect.”

### Perusing the Pathologies of Moral Judgement

The pathological attitudes profiled above do not only undermine the legitimate function of moral judgement, but they also provoke questions on the factual, logical, and normative bases of moral judgement. A critical perusal of these attitudes enables the separation of views that are consistent with the practical role of moral judgement from those that are pathological to moral judgement. This necessary distinction can lead to the emancipation of moral judgement from pathological attitudes.

It important to emphasize that moral judgement is a normative evaluation. Moral judgement entails a normative basis, objective, and facts. Hence, the acceptance or rejection of moral judgment must reckon with its normative, factual, and logical grounds.

The ten pathologies of moral judgement share common features: they tend to mischaracterize, distort, caricature, and disparage the legitimate function and purpose of moral judgement.

The attitudes that caricature moral judgement as an exercise in judgementalism and negativism, interference, or personal attack are deeply pathological because they disregard the important logical, factual, and normative basis of moral judgement. Instead of inquiring into its truthfulness and propriety, these attitudes discredit moral judgement by attributing ill motives to those who make the judgement.

The attitude that regards moral judgement as negativism poisons the well, so to speak, for it attributes ill motive on the one making the judgement, but fails to evaluate the moral judgement objectively. This is in fact a negative attitude toward mora judgement. The view that labels moral judgement as judgementalism is likewise a form of judgementalism. To frame moral judgement as personal attack is an attack against the moral judgement itself and the one who makes the judgement. All these attitudes are pathological for they cast moral judgement in a bad light.

*“Who are you to judge me?”* and *“Judge me not, for you know me not”* are pathologies that seek to impose false requisites for moral judgement. Moreover, these attitudes shift the focus from the moral judgement to the one who judges. The question on the right to judge is rather rhetorical than factual. The ability to make moral judgement emanates from human nature and the values of society. To judge is both a right and moral duty.

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The view that requires those who make judgement to have personal knowledge of and close ties with the person to judgement applies is unwarranted. These conditions are irrelevant to the truth and propriety of moral judgement.

The attitude that frames moral *judgement as an act of hypocrisy* is somewhat complicated. From the logical viewpoint, this claim is erroneous because the truth of a judgement is irrelevant to the behavior or attitude of the one who makes the judgement. From the moral vantage point, however, the issue is quite difficult. As Christians, the respondents resort to the Biblical exhortation not to judge (Mt. 7: 1) and the denunciation of hypocrisy. The Bible (Mt. 7: 3-5, NABRE, 2011) appears to support the claim that no one should judge. Yet, elsewhere in the same Bible are several instances of moral judgement (Jer. 5: 4; Prov. 26:4-5; 1 Jn. 1:4; Lk. 12:57; 1 Cor.6:9-10, 1Tim 1: 8-11 Holy Bible, NABRE, 2011). This apparent contradiction can be resolved by recognizing that what the Bible actually proscribes are the hypocritical and arrogant forms of moral judgement. The Bible does not prohibit moral judgement as a truthful and proper evaluation of the moral quality of acts, motives, and character.

To frame moral judgement as an act of hypocrisy, either because the one who judges is guilty of the same or some other moral faults, is wrong. While human beings are morally fallible, moral infallibility is not a prerequisite for moral judgement. Besides, moral evaluation is an ineluctable human activity. As moral beings, humans, including those who claim that morality is a myth, make moral judgments all the time.

*Moral perfectionism and superiority* is a pathology based on the belief that moral judgement is an exclusive privilege of those who are morally perfect. This attitude makes two basic assumptions: Firstly, no one is morally perfect; and secondly, no one is morally superior because everyone falls short of morality. Therefore, no one has the right to judge. This view ignores the fact that there exist significant moral differences among people. While it is true that all human beings are morally flawed, it is false to say that no one is morally superior.

Moral living follows some sort of a hierarchy. Some people demonstrate sterling virtues in their lives, while others lead morally despicable lives. Some give witness to the truth of moral goodness, while others give testament to moral depravity. Indeed, when it comes to morality and virtue, not all people are equal. Those who have moral ascendancy can morally exhort and reprimand.

Moreover, the lives of great world leaders clearly demonstrate this moral difference and hierarchy. As a leader, the Philippine President Ramon S. Magsaysay, known as the "People's President," after whom the *Ramon Magsaysay Award*, Asia's version of the Nobel Prize, is named, is undoubtedly morally superior to the dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos. In like manner, the great South African hero, Nelson Mandela (1994) is unquestionably

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morally superior to Joseph Stalin. It is true that no human being is morally perfect, but it is also true that some human beings are morally admirable while others are just morally despicable.

Couched in profane language, moral judgement loses its moral suasion. This is an abuse and misuse of moral judgement. At its core, this pathology is akin to personal attack. In the face of a grave evil, moral outrage and protest can easily become pathological when it is laced with profanities.

The “seems/feels like” attitude is a widespread pathology. This attitude not only gravely impairs the moral judgement’s evaluative power but also promotes moral ambiguity (seems like), which trivializes moral judgement into a matter of sentimental preference (feels like). Cast in ambiguity and sentimentalism, moral judgement loses its objective and practical character.

The experts and I agree that these pathological attitudes threaten both the paramount role of moral judgement in society and the moral foundations of society. These pathological attitudes typify the phenomenon of moral decline that characterizes most contemporary societies.

Certainly, the relativist and subjectivist orientations, which bind morality to personal discretion and culture, can produce certain attitudes that tend to marginalize the function of moral judgement in the public sphere and diminish it into some form of arbitrary pronouncements. The relativist and subjectivist moral perspectives can actually problematize moral judgement, particularly in a pluralist culture and society.

Moral skepticism, the view that nothing is morally certain and justified is substantially consistent with the attitudes that repudiate the practical and objective character of moral judgement. The pathological attitude of “Judge me not for you know me not” reeks of moral skepticism as it peddles the idea that since no one fully knows anyone, therefore no one should judge anyone.

Moral nihilism, the most radical objection to morality, supports the pathological attitudes that reject the validity and legitimacy of moral judgements. The attitude that repudiates the exercise and legitimacy of moral judgement for practical reasons and tends to support the eradication of morality from the public sphere is substantially consistent with moral nihilism. Lastly, the belief that moral judgement is a form of intolerance in view of the fact that individuals approach moral issues and problems in manifold ways aligns with moral pluralism.

It is worth noting that while these pathologies occur in the province of moral praxis, there is strong reason to believe that the competing ethical worldviews and postulates do exert great influence on formation of the pathological attitudes toward moral judgement. The social science experts and I agree that moral judgements, notwithstanding their normative and logical import, are mostly likely going to provoke negative reactions from those to whom judgement applies. Specifically, people are most likely to react positively to positive moral judgement and negatively to negative moral judgment. Judgement as the moral determination of also serves as a form of sanction.

All the experts affirmed that the pathological attitudes are in fact reactions against a specific form of moral judgement that determines an act, motive, or character as evil, wrong, or irresponsible. Behind these pathologies are perceptible motives and intentions that include the rejection of moral judgement to escape moral responsibility; the weaponization of moral judgement for social and political purposes; and the devaluation of morality in society.

## Summary of Findings

The pathologies profiled in this study reveal attitudes that are adversative to moral judgement. These pathologies caricature and distort moral judgement as an exercise in hypocrisy, interference, judgementalism, negativism, personal attack, moral perfectionism and superiority, sentimentalism, ambiguity, and profanity.

**Table 1** Pathologies of moral judgement

Moral Judgements	Pathologies
Personal attack	Moral judgement as personal attack
Hypocrisy	Moral judgement as hypocrisy
Who are you to judge me?	No one has the right to judge
Judge me not for you know me not	Personal knowledge and close ties as conditions for judgement
Interference	Moral judgement as intrusion
Judgementalism	Judgement as arrogance, contempt, and self-righteousness
Perfectionism and superiority	No one is morally perfect or superior, therefore, no one should judge
Negativism	Moral judgement as negative, harmful, and hostile
Profanity	Moral judgement couched in profane language
Seems/feels like	Moral judgement as sentimentalism and ambiguity

In turn, those who make moral judgement are stereotyped as hypocrites, judgmental, negative, hostile, arrogant, self-righteous, and intolerant. The fear of being negatively stereotyped leads to a culture of silence and moral indifference.

The pathologies are adversative reactions to a form of moral judgement that determines an act, motive, or character as evil, wrong, or vicious. No respondent expressed a pathological view on a form of moral judgement that approves an act, motive, or character as good, right, or virtuous.

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The competing and conflicting moral worldviews and ethical postulates influence the formation of the pathologies of moral judgement. Moral worldviews such as relativism, subjectivism, skepticism, and nihilism can challenge moral judgement as arbitrary, discretionary, uncertain, or even completely unjustified. The pluralist perspective portrays moral judgement as a form of intolerance owing to the fact that there are plural ways of making moral judgements.

The perceptible motives and intentions behind the pathologies of moral judgment include rejection of moral judgement to escape moral responsibility; the weaponization of moral judgement for social and political ends; and the marginalization of morality.

## Conclusion

The pathologies of moral judgement have far-reaching consequences on the moral foundations of social life. The most critical implications of these pathologies are the jettisoning of moral judgement and the disparagement of those who exercise moral judgement in the public sphere.

As moral judgement becomes a social pariah, the moral order degenerates, aggravating the culture of moral indifference that characterizes most contemporary societies. Counteracting the phenomenon of moral dissipation entails the emancipation of moral judgement from pathological attitudes. A constructive and responsible exercise of moral judgement is paramount to maintenance of the moral borders and boundaries in society.

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