

Temporal Horizons and the Reorganization of Moral Grammars – Daphne Fietz

Sociological research has shown that moral frameworks are shaped by institutional contexts, cultural traditions, and material environments. Yet time itself has largely been treated as contextual background rather than as a structural feature of moral form. This paper advances a theoretical argument at the intersection of the sociology of morality and the sociology of time. It proposes that temporal horizon is a missing axis of moral ecology: alongside cultural traditions, institutional structures, and material environments, the temporal conditions presupposed by moral frameworks are a constitutive dimension of the situations in which those frameworks operate. When those conditions shift, actors do not merely face strategic or practical difficulties; they experience a distinctive form of moral-temporal disorientation that can prompt the reorganization of the grammar itself.

The Gap

The sociology of morality has produced a rich account of how moral frameworks are ecologically situated. Existing approaches locate morality in historically sedimented traditions (Abend 2014; Taylor 1989; Weber 1930), institutional orders and organizational incentives (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Krause 2014), interactional processes (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Tavory, Prelat, and Ronen 2022), and material environments (Bargheer 2018; McDonnell 2023). While these approaches situate moral frameworks within social, cultural, and institutional time, they usually treat time as context rather than as a constitutive dimension of moral form itself. This absence is notable because sociology contains a dispersed but unintegrated lineage that recognizes that moral frameworks are temporally structured, and that these temporal structures in turn shape concrete practices to large-scale transformations.

Weber's comparative study of world religions traces how different religions organize the moral life through distinct temporal arcs, contrasting the episodic passivity of mysticism with the continuous, this-worldly discipline of inner-worldly asceticism (Weber [1915] 1946). Boltanski and Thévenot's orders of worth each entail not only principles of evaluation but distinctive temporalities (2006). Abend's analysis of moral backgrounds distinguishes frameworks that demand consistency across lives as wholes from those that segment morality into discrete outcomes and transactions (2014). Studies of moral identity show that aspiring toward futures becomes an entrenched part of how actors understand themselves morally (Frye 2012), and that when dominant scripts of success lose plausibility, actors creatively recalibrate their moral-temporal commitments (Sanchez, Lamont, and Zilberstein 2022).

Yet this lineage remains fragmented and has not crystallized into a generalized research agenda. The macrosociological literature maps how temporal structures channel broad historical shifts in moral life but treats those structures as relatively stable. Recent meso-level work on moral identity and plausible futures brings this down to the level of actors navigating uncertainty, but lacks a framework that maps the distinct temporal logics of different moral grammars.

The sociology of time, by contrast, has established that actors actively construct and coordinate temporal horizons rather than simply inhabiting them (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013; Mische 2009). Yet this literature has largely treated temporal misalignment as a cognitive, strategic, or narrative problem, without theorizing how the constructed temporal horizons are embedded in moral grammars.

The Framework

The framework starts from the insight that moral grammars, the historically sedimented evaluative logics through which actors orient action and judge worth, contain implicit temporal arcs. Three arcs recur across the sociological literature and the cases examined here, introduced as heuristic rather than exhaustive. A consequentialist arc anchors moral worth in future outcomes, presupposing a sufficiently open and responsive future. A present-enactment arc, which encompasses both virtue-ethical and relational-care orientations, anchors worth in what is expressed and realized in practice, whether through individual character cultivation or through the quality of connection with others, loosening the tie to environmental outcomes but remaining dependent on communities of practice that can recognize relevant subject positions. A deontological arc anchors worth in sustained adherence to obligation, appearing across the cases as a background resource rather than a dominant project grammar.

These arcs presuppose specific temporal horizons, and it is through projects, the constructed temporal trajectories, that abstract grammars are translated into situation-specific action (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). A project is coherent as a trajectory only if the future it projects toward remains available. When the horizon shifts, the project does not merely become harder, however. The embedded moral grammar loses its footing, producing moral-temporal disorientation: a condition in which the grammar's criteria of worth, its arc of obligation, and its account of what counts as progress no longer connect to available futures.

Actors can address various elements of the now problematic situation: Temporal work addresses the situation and project without restructuring the grammar: actors reinterpret conditions, rescale horizons, or reframe setbacks in ways that preserve the projects and grammar's temporal arc.

Disengagement operates at the project level, either through abandonment or project substitution, leaving the grammar intact while suspending situational misalignment. Moral reorganization, the least theorized of the three and the primary focus of this paper, operates at the level of the grammar itself. Through what the paper calls reanchoring, actors relocate the temporal arc of the grammar by foregrounding latent moral-temporal repertoires, elements present within the broader moral background culture that can sustain commitment under altered conditions. The reorganized grammar preserves moral commitment while shifting its temporal architecture.

The Cases

Four cases illustrate moral reorganization across different domains, temporal scales, and degrees of repertoire distance. My own work traces how a German climate resistance group affirmed moral commitment amid successive political setbacks and ecological deterioration. The longitudinal study shows how the group moved from a consequentialist grammar of catastrophe prevention toward a virtue-ethical orientation in which moral worth relocated from outcomes to principled enactment of responsibility. This reanchoring was made legible by the tacit background of German post-war historical memory, in which passive complicity with mass harm has been widely condemned, illustrating how distant repertoires can sustain reorganization when proximate ones are exhausted.

Wendland's ethnography of medical training in Malawi shows a structurally similar reanchoring under conditions of permanent scarcity rather than deteriorating horizons. Students who entered clinical practice with an outcome-oriented professional grammar, organized around diagnosing, curing, and uplifting the nation through science, confronted a hospital in which those treatment possibilities were largely unavailable. Rather than retreating into the emotional detachment documented among students in resource-rich settings, they deepened a relational-care orientation already present at the outset, relocating moral worth from what medicine would eventually achieve to what the encounter with the patient constituted in the present. This reanchoring was sustained by the broader cultural background of *uMunthu*, the Chichewa philosophy of interconnected personhood, which made empathetic responsibility legible as a moral orientation.

Wood's account of insurgent collective action in El Salvador introduces a theoretically important reversal: moral reorganization as a response to opening rather than closing horizons. Initially, under conditions of extreme repression, when instrumental success was unlikely, campesinos anchored their engagement in defiance, dignity, and refusal, irrespective of outcomes. As the military stalemate created new opportunities for land occupation, the evaluative logic shifted toward the pleasure of agency, relocating worth back toward outcomes that were now achievable. This bidirectionality

shows that reanchoring is not a one-way movement toward present-centered grammars but a dynamic recalibration of the grammar's dominant arc in response to what the situation affords.

Lastly, Fassin's account of Médecins Sans Frontières in Baghdad during the 2003 Iraq War provides the limiting case. The bombing of Baghdad and confinement of the group produced an acute organizational crisis, structured around the tension between an efficacy principle and a presence principle. A fractious internal debate ensued, in which a reanchoring toward charter obligation despite outcomes was attempted, but never stabilized. The case reveals that reanchoring requires not only the availability of repertoires but conditions that allow the reorganized grammar to secure collective recognition and stabilization.

Contribution

Together, the cases show that moral reorganization is neither abandonment nor preservation of moral commitment but its creative transformation under pressure, and that its success depends on the availability of repertoires within the moral background culture and on the social conditions that recognize and stabilize a reanchored grammar. The paper thereby contributes a fourth axis to the sociology of moral ecology, proposes moral reorganization as a distinctive and undertheorized mechanism, and opens a research agenda that is practically urgent: in conditions of prolonged uncertainty and contracting futures, understanding how actors reorganize moral grammars rather than simply preserving or abandoning them becomes both analytically and politically consequential. This question provides a different entry into the present world of "polycrisis": rather than inquiring into alternative visions and fostering hope, it asks what moral orientations are available when these are not available anymore.