

Book Review for *The Power of Morality in Movements: Civic Engagement in Climate Justice, Human Rights, and Democracy*

**Reviewed by David Brockway
Kennesaw State University**

Anders Sevelsted and Jonas Toubøl (Eds.), *The Power of Morality in Movements: Civic Engagement in Climate Justice, Human Rights, and Democracy*. Springer, 2022, 334 pages. ISBN: 978-3-030-98797-8 (eBook). <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-98798-5>

The Power of Morality in Movements is an in-depth analysis of how morality drives individuals into joining movement organizations. The discussion of defining morality is thought-provoking, as what may be the moral high ground for one may be considered deplorable to another. As a student of international policy, I am invested in immigration and refugee issues. My moral compass dictates that U.S. lawmakers should allow for more nuanced legislation that reflects our twenty-first century society and economy while considering legal admittance for immigrants and asylum seekers. Yet, for someone who is more nationalistic, their moral tendency may be one of closed borders and stricter immigration and refugee policies. Who is right? What is the moral thing to do? This book does not favor one side or the other. Rather, the editors simply state that:

The fundamental moral principle of the sacredness of human individuals informs pro-immigrant and refugee rights activists' struggle alongside refugees on migration routes to safe-havens. Here, nationalist, and xenophobic anti-immigrant, movements base their claims on strongly held moral convictions about society's dependence on the integrity of the nation. (p. 4)

Refusing to take sides as it engages this and other issues, the book creates an arena for discussion and analysis of the conditions that shape a person's ideologies, with the general definition of morality as "what we ought to do" (p. 6). What one believes is the correct and proper answer to "what we ought to do" will never be equal nor universal, so we are left simply trying to understand what makes us choose the battles we wish to fight—be it climate change, human rights, immigration, or another cause.

This academic book, edited by Anders Sevelsted and Jonas Toubøl, comprises contributions by scholars who discuss the place of morality in social activism and political movements. In particular, the book argues that morality as a concept has been excluded from contemporary research in the social sciences. The authors posit that while historical theorists have considered morality in civic engagement, they have failed to identify its essence as critical to social movements and political activism. The book argues that during the 1970s, when the development of the social sciences became highly dependent on empirical quantitative and qualitative data, the concept of morality became even less of a consideration as it did not fit into the mold of empirical research. Researchers focused instead on the operations of social and political movements, as they were unable to identify exactly where and how morality fits as a cog in the machinery of what drives people and institutions to engage in activism. The editors state: "This sidesteps and glosses over the moral identity formation happening at the micro-level of interaction connecting the mobilization to society's morality" (p. 19). The editors have recognized a devaluation in the role morality plays in activism and, in doing so, have created this volume emphasizing varying perspectives of values, tradition, religion, culture, and time as they relate to morality in movements.

The Power of Morality in Movements is presented in five sections. The introduction offers an overview of how morality has been dismissed as irrelevant in activism research, and offers that, in fact, morality is a core component of how and why people involve themselves in a variety of movements. The editors then divide the book into three sections, each illuminating a key component of why morality is essential to the research of

social movements: (1) Selves in Interaction, (2) Rationalisation and Justification, and (3) Culture and Tradition. As I read through these sections, it occurred to me that they represent the “who, why, and how” of morality in movements. Throughout the book, the authors specifically target issues of climate change, human rights, and immigration as movement examples, with each section containing offerings from distinct contributors through the lens of their personal research and experience. The editors conclude with a fifth and final section that offers a synthesis of the book’s ideas and encourages future research.

Selves in Interaction discusses internal and external axiological drivers as causal in social and political movement engagement. In other words, this section focuses on the individual psyche and what motivates people to join a cause. Chapter four, author Eva Fernández G. G. “illustrates how universal value orientations and moral commitments shape and orient political activism with refugees based on common ideational solidarity projects,” and offers that these “axiological drivers, namely, universal value orientations and moral commitments, increase the predicted probability for engagement in refugee solidarity activism” (p. 63). Broadly, this chapter identifies universal and interpersonal orientations as fundamental motivators for activism in refugee engagement. It appeals to the moral self to care enough that the self must become involved in multiple levels of political and social activism.

To further this concept, in chapter five, authors Jonas Toubøl and Peter Gundelach detail various levels of activism, from humanitarian activity to political protest to civil disobedience. Using statistical data from the Danish refugee solidarity movement, they identify and define these varied levels of involvement. Their theory suggests that a moral predisposition toward refugee crises will indicate how and to what degree one may participate. As they state:

In short, the result suggests that predispositions, in general, do not directly influence changes in attitudes but instead influence attitudes as mediated through different contexts of activism in the sense that specific contexts of activism connect certain values to certain attitudinal outcomes. (p. 97)

Each of these levels of activism represents an individual’s sense of moral duty, and the extent of

activity one will engage in to promote change.

The next section, Rationalisation and Justification, goes deeper into quantitative research, providing statistical data on various realms of activism. In chapter seven, author Troels Krarup discusses alternate theories through a lens of American pragmatism and French theory of justification to explain social engagement. He then includes statistical data from a survey conducted on local greenspaces to compare the two. Krarup also posits that civic activism is akin to economics, discussing the market concepts of Adam Smith. He offers a perspective that activism is a barter where one sacrifices personal wealth (time and money) for the benefit of others while achieving the profit of societal status.

Chapter eight author Sophia Wathne emphasizes morality through the lens of political theory, as she states:

While we of course need to understand the mechanics of social movements to understand the theories, to truly take social movements seriously as moral actors, we need to also engage with their values, with their ideas, and with their strategy: We need to recognize their political theory as valuable contributions. (p. 172)

In her analysis, Wathne moves away from the mechanisms of movements, and instead offers that societal activists are seeking to create or avoid change and thus creating their own political theory. She proposes that in order to further movement knowledge, researchers need to recognize the role activism plays as authors of political theory.

The Culture and Tradition section focuses on dark humor, social media, and the internet as modern tools for civic engagement, and examines how these tools affect the emotions or moral beliefs of those who engage with them. An example is provided by contributor Jun Liu in chapter twelve on the use of dark humor and social media platforms. He discusses the Quangan “carbon nine leak incident” as a case study of online environmental activism in 2018, investigating the “emotional expressions in social media posts and different types of political participation online, both quantitatively and qualitatively” (p. 266). The use of these modern tools has proven to be successful in creating individual and collective emotional responses that morally drive one to commit to activism.

The conclusion, written by editors Sevelsted and Toubøl, is a short revisitation of the key points of the book, highlighting that its purpose is not to dictate what is moral and what is not. They conclude:

The intention of the book was not to define morality in any definitive sense but to explore the “semantic field” around morality: ethics, universalism, principled beliefs, ideals, values etc., and how this could translate into a research agenda for social scientists interested in social movements and similar forms of civic action. (p. 318)

In other words, they do not seek to operationalize or even define morality as an absolute. Rather, the edited volume is an academically rigorous investigation of the power of morality in movements, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Finally, the book posits that more social-scientific research is required to deepen greater scholarship and understanding of this subject at large. This is a highly original work that offers a complete and in-depth analysis of the place of morality both in social movements and in society in general.

The book appears to be of general interest to students, scholars, and academics from various disciplines, especially for those who have an interest in social movements and civil society studies. I confess that while reading, I found myself intimidated by the lengthy statements and elevated concepts. At times, I would read an excerpt and then pause thinking, *there’s something valuable here that I need to re-read, analyze, and reflect on*. I once had a sociology professor confess to me that “sociologists love their jargon.” And while this book does indulge in such sociological jargon, it should not deter the reader from exploring its varied and valuable elements, as the book also provides abundant information that assists in identifying the complexity of morality and its relevance to activism.

From the outset, one would think this book is useful for anyone interested in understanding *how* social movements are created, organized, and operated. However, the real reason why this book is a worthwhile gem is because it discusses *why* social movements are successful—with morality being the principal answer to this question. It describes how morals influence movement engagement, and therefore how to appeal to the masses for membership or participation. For those who are interested in

better understanding these issues, this book is a one-stop shop for diving into the complexities of the power of morality in social movements.

The book offers relevant literature reviews and case studies for its thesis, and provides ample charts and graphs to assist readers in absorbing the concepts discussed. The various authors in this volume provide a multidisciplinary background—sociology, philosophy, political science, social work, and business—to broaden the conversation through individual perspectives and writing styles. Each author has their own unique experience, research, and perspective on morality, which creates a dynamic and diverse read, as opposed to a sole author or editorial offering. It should be noted that this book was composed in Scandinavia, and many of its case studies stem from this region. Though it is possible that much of the cumbersome wording could perhaps stem from slippage in English-language translation, it does not obfuscate or diminish the overall analysis—particularly because the case studies are applicable to a wide variety of domestic or global social/political movements.

To close, one might wonder how this book is relevant to the study of democracy and immigration and the fundamental discussions of this journal. I too pondered this as I read through the contributions and arrived at this conclusion: It is because we, in the U.S., are a democracy. We have the privilege of choosing our ideals based on our personal experiences and moral compasses. As this book outlines the importance of morals in social and political movements, it is worthy of exploration to understand why we have varying opinions of “what we ought to do” in terms of immigration, naturalization, refugees, and asylum seekers. In understanding these unique and sometimes conflicting patterns, perhaps we can discover new methods by which to bridge the moral gaps and create lasting beneficial change for both native-born citizens and immigrants.

About the Author

David Brockway is a student in the Master of Science in International Policy Management at Kennesaw State University.