

From Representation to Obligation

Bree Beal

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Abstract

How does a person arrive at a judgment about what to do, what is wrong, or what deserves praise? Normative Detachment Theory explains such judgments through the organization of the thinking that produces them. The theory begins with ordinary practical understanding: a situation is represented in relation to concerns, possibilities, and standards, from which a particular judgment can emerge. Moral judgment is a more specifically organized case. A represented relationship connects someone who can respond with something that matters in its own right, and the relationship helps shape the judgment. NDT analyzes the relationship through three distinct questions: how the object matters, how the object is related to the responder, and what response is represented as possible. The analysis distinguishes moral judgment from other practical judgment without equating morality with admirable conduct, a particular doctrine, or a characteristic vocabulary. It also explains how different interpretations of one situation can sustain conflicting judgments within one person. The argument proceeds through ordinary examples and a literary case, distinguishing the conceptual work performed by the architecture from the unresolved problem of identifying its complete organization in actual cognition.

A practical beginning

From a loose joint to a practical judgment

You are assembling a chair. Most of the work is finished, but one joint remains loose. You can feel the movement when you press against the chair's back. A screw holds the joint together, and you have a screwdriver that fits it. You understand tightening the screw as the available way to secure the joint, and securing the joint as part of completing the chair. Nothing else in the situation, as you understand it, gives you a reason to leave the joint loose. You conclude that you should tighten the screw.

The conclusion can seem too ordinary to require explanation. Yet consider how much the explanation has already supplied. The screw is not merely an object with a certain shape. It is a fastening in a joint that needs securing, within a project you are undertaking. Turning the screwdriver matters because of an expected change in the joint. The change matters because a finished chair, rather than an unfinished one, is the result toward which the activity is directed. The practical question arises within an organized understanding of the situation.

Alter the understanding and the appropriate movement can change. Suppose you discover that the screw has a reverse thread. Continuing to turn it in the direction you initially intended would loosen the joint. The goal of finishing the chair need not change; your understanding of the means changes. Or suppose the joint must remain slightly loose until another part is aligned. Tightening the screw can still be useful, but not yet. The situation supplies a condition on when the useful act should be performed. You do not need a new ultimate value every time the practical conclusion changes.

Normative Detachment Theory, or NDT, concerns the formation of conclusions of this general kind. A *normative judgment* prescribes or appraises: it concerns what to do, whether an action meets a requirement, or how something is to be evaluated. Tightening the screw is an instrumental example. Judging an explanation inadequate, a purchase imprudent, or a performance excellent also involves normativity in the broad sense. None of those judgments has to be moral.

Judgment, action, and a decision model

NDT calls the formation of a prescription or appraisal *detachment*. The term names the movement from a represented situation, with its operative evaluations and connections, to a judgment. It does not name emotional distance or withdrawal from other people. Nor does it mean that the judgment must be followed by action. You might judge that the screw should be tightened and then stop working because the telephone rings. The judgment has formed even though the intended movement does not occur.

Conversely, the movement itself does not reveal everything about the judgment. Someone following a sequence of memorized hand movements could turn the screwdriver without judging the joint to need tightening. Another person might tighten it to conceal damage before returning the chair. A useful account of cognition must distinguish what is done from the understanding, inference, or routine involved in doing it. Predicting the movement and explaining the thinking are related tasks, not identical tasks.

The chair example introduces part of NDT's architecture. The person has a working understanding of an activity, distinguishes relevant possibilities, and connects those possibilities to something that matters within the activity. NDT calls the organized working understanding a *decision model*. The phrase does not posit a second thinker inside the person. It names how the practical problem is represented: what the available actions are, what they might bring about, which standards apply, and which considerations take priority.

A decision model need not resemble a consciously inspected diagram. A skilled person may see what needs doing and respond immediately. NDT uses inference in a functional sense: information and evaluation are organized so that some conclusions follow while others do not. The organization could be realized through rapid perception-like processing, deliberate reasoning, or a combination. Drawing its dependencies is a way to explain the organization, not a claim that a literal diagram is stored in the brain.

How the chair becomes a practical question

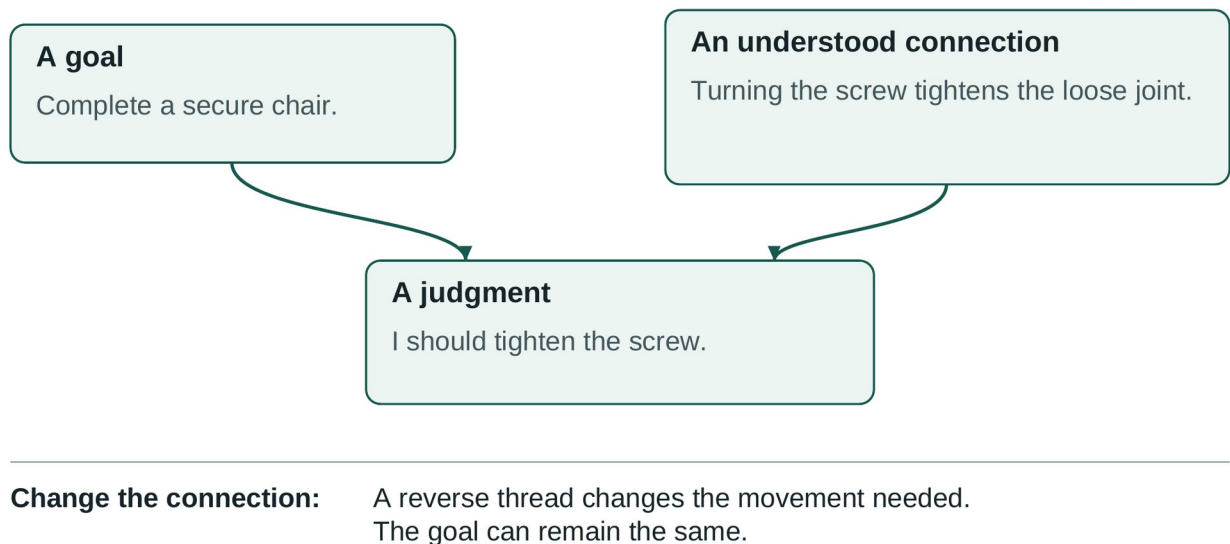


Figure 1. A practical judgment depends on an organized situation. The loose joint does not prescribe an action by itself. Completing the chair supplies a goal, and the represented connection between turning the screw and securing the joint supplies a means. Changing that connection can change the prescribed movement without changing the goal. Arrows indicate explanatory dependence, not a measured sequence of brain events.

The larger question is what must be added to explain moral cognition. Is a judgment moral because it concerns a familiar topic, invokes a principle, or produces a beneficial action? Or does its cognitive character depend on how the person understands the situation and how that understanding contributes to the judgment? NDT develops the second possibility. The first question is where evaluation enters practical thinking.

NDT's further wager is that the diversity of moral judgments can be explained through a common cognitive organization. The familiar differences between moral and prudential reasons, or between having a concern and drawing on it in a particular judgment, become requirements for that explanation. Showing that behavior alone leaves such differences unresolved motivates the search; it does not establish that a single unifying structure exists. The companion paper [What Makes a Judgment Moral?](#) develops the argument, the competing case for disunity, and the particular answer NDT proposes.

How an “ought” can emerge from what is represented

Where evaluation enters

The chair example includes an explicit goal: finish the chair. NDT does not claim to derive the goal from the bare physical properties of the screw. If the starting description excludes every concern, requirement, priority, and distinction among preferable and less preferable outcomes, nothing in NDT creates practical guidance from that absence. The available facts would not yet explain why tightening matters.

Hume's is-ought passage asks how a writer can move from assertions about what is to assertions about what ought to be without explaining the new relation. NDT accepts the need for that explanation. Its question is not whether an evaluatively empty premise magically yields an obligation, but whether the representations from which cognition actually proceeds are always empty in the stipulated way. The difference is between a logical prohibition on an unsupported inference and a description of the information already operative in thought (Hume, *Treatise*, 3.1.1.27).

In ordinary practical life, people often encounter things through what they afford, threaten, enable, or frustrate. Within chair assembly, the loose joint can be experienced as needing attention rather than first appearing as a neutral displacement to which importance is added in a separate act. A representation of danger may similarly involve more than accurate recognition of a pattern. The possibility of something to prevent or escape can be part of the role the representation plays.

NDT's *Constitutive Evaluativity Thesis* concerns the latter possibility. Some representations are evaluative partly because of what they represent or because of the functional role that makes them the representations they are. Evaluation need not always be attached afterward by a separate desire, command, or appraisal. In the encoded case, a representation's role is partly constituted by a standing organization that treats represented outcomes differently—for example, as conditions to maintain, prevent, or restore.

Not every representation that informs action thereby has evaluation built into its identity. A neutral sensor can feed a separate controller, and the controller can assign significance to its readings. NDT distinguishes that arrangement from one in which the evaluation-bearing role partly constitutes the representation itself. The same outward response might arise through either organization. The label *danger* or an observed avoidance movement cannot decide between them.

The explicit goal in the chair example is a legitimate source of evaluation in its own right. NDT accommodates a person who wants the chair finished and judges tightening necessary to that goal. It also allows evaluation applied by a separable process and evaluation built from several contributing sources. The general requirement that normative judgment have evaluative grounding is broader than the claim that some representations are constitutively evaluative.

Evaluation, accuracy, and guidance

Being correct about a situation is not the same as preferring an outcome, and preferring an outcome is not the same as judging a particular action appropriate. A thermometer can represent the temperature accurately without indicating whether the person should warm the room, cool a specimen, record a result, or do nothing. To obtain practical guidance, the relevant temperature must be connected to the activity, its concerns, available actions, and constraints.

NDT accordingly separates success or error in representation, evaluation of represented outcomes, and guidance among possible actions. The theory does not assume that every meaningful representation satisfies a universal theory of semantic evaluativity. Still less does correctness by itself contain a moral rule. The distinctive proposal is narrower: evaluation can sometimes be part of an active representation's constitution, while the move from evaluation to a specific judgment requires further organization.

That further organization can include constraints on means as well as preferences among outcomes. Finishing the chair is not a sufficient reason to take someone else's tools against their wishes. Whether the tools may be used, what alternatives are available, and whether any exceptional circumstances matter are additional questions. NDT represents the requirements and priorities the person actually brings to the situation; it does not assume that every practical problem reduces to maximizing one outcome score.

Explanation is not endorsement. NDT can represent someone making a mistake about the screw, acting under an unreasonable requirement, or adopting a priority the reader rejects. Explaining the resulting judgment does not make its premises true or its conclusion justified. A descriptive theory must be able to explain mistaken judgments without quietly replacing them with the judgments someone should have formed.

NDT describes how an ought can emerge from an *evaluatively structured* representation of what is. Sometimes the evaluative element is an explicit goal; sometimes it is supplied by a separable evaluator; sometimes the representation is partly constituted by its evaluative role. A decision model connects those resources to a particular practical question. The claim does not yet identify which resulting judgments are moral.

One breakfast, two ways of reaching a decision

A relationship-supported judgment

A parent is preparing breakfast for a child. Before pouring milk over the cereal, the parent notices a sour smell. The parent believes the milk has spoiled and could make the child ill. The milk has not yet been served, so the parent can prevent the child from drinking it. The immediate choice is whether to use the milk or discard it and find something else for breakfast.

Suppose the parent decides, *I should throw the milk away*. The conclusion is sensible within the situation as described. But why has serving the milk become unacceptable? An explanation of the parent's judgment needs more than the fact that the milk ends up in the bin.

One explanation begins with the child. The parent cares about the child's well-being, not merely about avoiding an inconvenience or obtaining a benefit. In the parent's understanding, the child matters in the child's own right. Their shared life gives the parent particular knowledge of the child and a personal connection to the child's needs. The parent also understands an available way to respond: withholding the milk prevents a possible injury to someone for whom the parent cares.

The features are connected, not simply collected. The parent sees the possibility of illness as a reason against serving the milk *because it is the child who could be harmed, and the parent can respond to the child's situation*. Discarding the milk is a means of preventing that harm. The represented parent-child relationship helps make the possibility of illness practically significant and helps form the judgment.

Nothing in the explanation requires the parent to recite a principle of parental duty. The judgment could arise as soon as the sour smell is noticed. The question is what gives the judgment its organization, not whether that organization is consciously rehearsed. A quick judgment can be deeply relationship-based; a long explanation can fail to identify the thought that actually mattered.

A procedure with the same conclusion

Now keep the parent, child, breakfast, spoilage belief, and available options in place, but imagine a different route to the same decision. The parent has learned a general food-handling rule through work: discard milk that shows signs of spoilage. At home, the rule is a familiar part of managing the refrigerator. The parent recognizes the relevant condition and applies the procedure: spoiled milk is discarded.

The procedural possibility is easiest to approach through a more ordinary piece of household organization. Someone rotating supplies might move a newly opened carton behind an older one simply because older supplies are used first. The person does not have to reconsider everyone's welfare while carrying out each step. A procedure can already settle a small practical question. Imagine the discard judgment forming in that procedural manner, even though a child is waiting for breakfast and the consequences are important.

Following a rule is not, by itself, what makes the imagined route different. The food-handling rule could be a convenient expression of the parent's concern, and concern could remain active through the rule. For the contrast, suppose instead that applying the procedure supplies the entire basis of the particular discard judgment: no represented moral relationship helps form it. The parent still loves the child. What differs is the contribution of that relationship to one judgment, not the existence or quality of the family relationship.

The contrast is stipulated, not inferred from routine, speed, distraction, or the parent's later explanation. The imagined episodes differ in how the judgment forms while preserving the conclusion. The household procedure helps make the possibility intelligible; it does not turn all routine conduct into nonmoral conduct.

NDT classifies the relationship-supported judgment as moral and the procedure-only judgment, as specified, as normative but nonmoral. The word *nonmoral* does not condemn the action. The milk can be discarded, the child protected, and the parent entirely competent in both episodes. The procedure may handle the problem well enough that the relationship need not do additional work in that particular judgment. NDT is distinguishing kinds of cognition, not announcing that a good parent must morally deliberate over every household task.

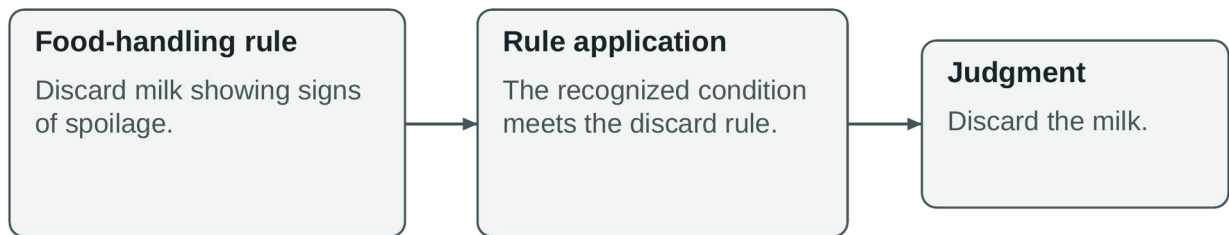
One breakfast, two contributing bases

Kept the same: parent, child, spoilage belief, options, and discard conclusion.

Relationship-supported judgment



Procedure-only judgment, as stipulated



The parent may love the child in both episodes.

Routine does not establish the absent contribution; the comparison stipulates it.

Figure 2. The same sensible conclusion can be reached through different thought. The relationship-supported episode and the stipulated procedure-only episode both end with the judgment to discard the milk. The contrast concerns the contributing basis of the judgment, not better and worse parenting. Neither speed nor routine identifies the route; the routes are specified for the illustration rather than measured in actual parents.

The example makes a distinction available that an observation of the final action leaves open. It also identifies a more precise explanatory task. Saying that the first parent acts from care is a beginning, but *care* can conceal several questions: what matters about the child, how the child is connected to the parent, and what the parent can do. NDT analyzes those questions separately so that the familiar whole can be understood without treating every part as already moral.

What a moral relationship contains

The term *moral relationship* would explain nothing if it meant only a relationship that produces a moral judgment. NDT instead describes the proposed relationship through capacities and representations that need not themselves be called moral. The analysis extends the project developed in *The Nonmoral Conditions of Moral Cognition* and *Cognition in Moral Space* (Beal, 2021; Beal & Gogia, 2021).

In the breakfast episode, the parent is the represented responder: the person whose conduct is at issue. The child is the object of concern: the being whose possible illness matters. NDT calls the corresponding roles

subject and *object*. An object in that terminology need not be an inanimate thing. The distinction separates the person represented as acting or responding from whatever the response concerns.

The roles must remain attached to the right people. The parent's relationship to the child cannot explain a judgment about someone else's treatment of a different child merely because care appears somewhere in both stories. The relevant relationship must connect the particular responder and object in the judgment being explained. The familiar breakfast scene makes the connection easy to follow before a more general account is needed.

Mattering in its own right

The child's well-being matters to the parent beyond the child's usefulness. The child is not merely a means of securing money, reputation, company, or some other benefit. NDT calls the relevant positive evaluation *positive inherent value*. The phrase describes how the child is represented; it does not assert that an observer has measured a mind-independent property called inherent value.

The chair offers a nearby contrast. Someone might preserve a cheap screwdriver only because it is needed to finish the assembly. The screwdriver's practical importance can be considerable without its mattering in its own right. Another screwdriver, inherited from a loved person, might be treasured even after it is no longer usable. The physical kind of object does not decide how it is valued. A person's representation does.

Negative inherent value is equally important. Something can be represented as bad or objectionable in itself, rather than merely as an obstacle to an unrelated objective. NDT does not identify moral cognition solely with affection, benevolence, or positive concern. A person's representation of something as inherently bad may also help organize a moral judgment. Whether the judgment calls for avoidance, resistance, punishment, toleration, or some other response requires additional reasoning; negative value alone prescribes none of those responses.

Positive and negative inherent value are represented independently. Someone can cherish and loathe the same person within one complex understanding. That combination differs from indifference. If positive and negative value were opposite ends of one scale, equally strong positive and negative evaluations could disappear into a neutral midpoint. The resulting number would make a richly conflicted relation indistinguishable from one in which neither kind of value was represented.

NDT preserves four possibilities: positive only, negative only, both, and neither. The four possibilities concern the object's represented value, not four complete moral judgments. *Both* does not by itself establish a conflict between two judgments, and *negative* does not make the judging person evil. The later interpretation, possible responses, applicable requirements, and actual contribution still matter.

Nor does an arbitrarily tiny recorded value establish a moral relationship automatically. The formal account requires qualifying value and agency conditions and a derived interaction between them. It does not provide one universal empirical threshold for every person, object, and situation. For present purposes, the important architectural requirement is that the positive and negative components remain available separately throughout the reasoning. Their combination cannot be replaced by a net goodness score.

How the object is related to the responder

Value answers one question: how does the object matter? It does not yet answer how the object is connected to a particular responder. The breakfast example contains an easily recognizable connection through the parent's shared life with the child. NDT calls the more general role *Relational Positioning*: how the particular object is located relative to the particular subject in the represented situation.

Positioning is not a measure of emotional warmth or geographical proximity. A person far away can be understood as a family member, a patient, or a political opponent. A person standing nearby can remain merely one figure in a crowd. Physical distance and the strength of affection do not exhaust the ways someone becomes related to someone else in thought.

NDT distinguishes three routes through which positioning can occur. They can overlap, and none is required in every case. The point of separating them is to explain how the relation can survive the loss of one route while changing when every route is absent.

The first route is **intimacy**. The parent knows the child through an ongoing life together: habits, expressions, dependencies, memories, and particular concerns. The relationship is not exhausted by the category *parent*. A friend may be connected through a history of trust, and an estranged family member through a difficult shared history. Intimacy in NDT names a particularized tie; it does not guarantee affection, harmony, or moral approval.

The second route is **direct encounter**. Imagine coming upon a stranger who has fallen and is asking for help. You have no shared history, and a social category need not be what first makes the stranger relevant. The particular person's condition and address can become directly operative in your understanding of the situation. The encounter connects the person needing a response with you as someone who might respond. Merely being in the same room is insufficient; the person's presence or condition must actually enter the relevant relation. Empathy can mediate an encounter, but neither the word *empathy* nor an empathic feeling guarantees the whole structure.

The third route is **identity-mediated positioning**. An identity or role supplies a bridge between subject and object. Three forms of that bridge are useful to distinguish. In shared identity, someone matters as a fellow member of a group the person takes as relevant: a fellow citizen, a member of a community, or another human being. The category does work only when it connects the particular person to the responder's understanding. Knowing that two people happen to share a category is not enough.

Contrastive identity relates people through a meaningful difference: ally and opponent, insider and outsider, or a self defined against a particular other. Opposition is a relation, not the absence of one. An opponent may be respected, feared, admired, or loathed. Relational opposition therefore cannot substitute for negative inherent value. The two questions—how the person is positioned and how the person is valued—must remain separate.

Complementary-role identity connects directionally paired roles. A physician receives an unfamiliar patient for a consultation. The patient is not merely another person somewhere in the building: the patient is understood as the person for whom the physician is conducting the consultation. Physician and patient supply complementary positions. The same form can appear in teacher and student or official and constituent. Neither intimacy nor membership in the same group is required to explain the bridge.

The role label still does not supply the whole judgment. A physician might take up the physician–patient relation and disagree with another physician about what it requires. Confidentiality, treatment priorities, permissions, and exceptions need their own explanation. Positioning locates the people relative to one another; it does not contain every consequence conventionally associated with their roles. Nor must both parties consciously endorse the role structure for the relation to be represented in the judgment being explained.

The family scene can involve several routes together: the parent’s particular history with the child, parental identity, and the child’s immediate presence. Removing one route need not remove the relation. A parent thinking about a child who is away from home can retain intimacy and identity without direct encounter. A stranger’s appeal can establish a relation without either shared history or a previously relevant group identity. By contrast, removing every qualifying route leaves value and agency unjoined as a represented subject–object relationship.

The relationship must work as one connected structure

Same responder: the parent. Same object: the child.

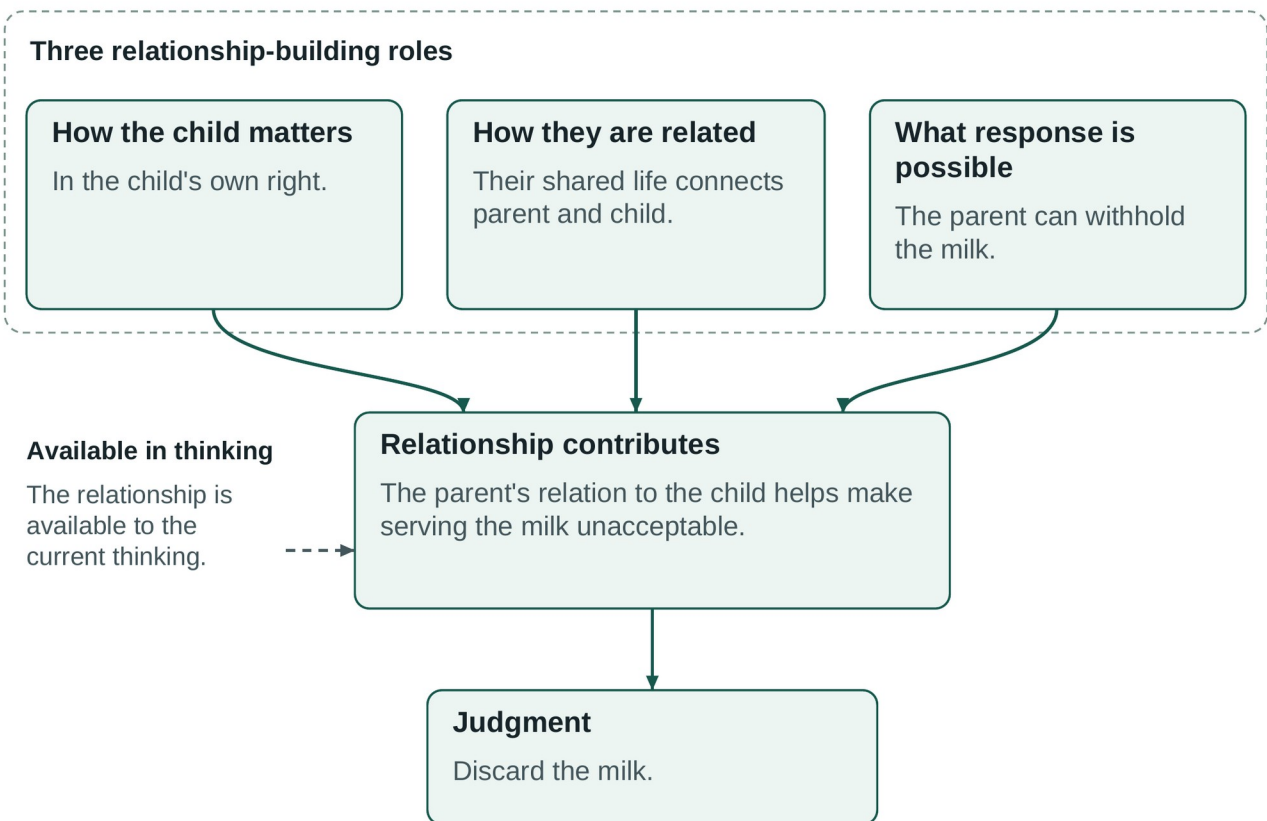


Figure 3. Three questions organize the relationship; their answers must work together in the judgment. In breakfast, the child matters in the child’s own right, the parent is connected to the child through their shared life, and withholding the milk is a possible response. NDT calls the three relationship-building roles inherent valence, Relational Positioning, and perceived agency. Access and actual contribution are further requirements for the relationship to help form a particular judgment, not additional builders.

What response is possible

The third question concerns **perceived agency**. In the breakfast scene, the parent can prevent the child from drinking the milk. Mattering and connection acquire a practical bearing because the parent represents a way to respond.

Agency in NDT does not mean admirable character, freedom from every constraint, or responsibility for a harmful outcome. It concerns a represented capacity to affect or respond to the particular object or relationship. Someone might be able to prevent harm, offer testimony, repair a past injury, express recognition, or act through a collective role. Those are different response possibilities, not interchangeable measurements of one action's immediate feasibility.

A past event can therefore be morally appraised even when it cannot be undone. The appraisal may concern what someone could have done at the time, and a current judgment may concern repair or acknowledgment. The time and kind of possibility must be part of the represented case. An interpreter cannot rescue any preferred classification by inventing an ever wider range of hypothetical capacities after the fact.

The boundary is real. If the person represents the subject as unable to make any relevant response across the possibilities admitted in the case, the agency condition is absent. Bare awareness, concern, or thought does not automatically supply a response. A person can regard something as terrible without representing anyone who could have acted or answered in relation to it. Whether particular impossible-duty cases are adequately treated by NDT's boundary remains a question for the theory, not an invitation to redefine agency whenever a case is difficult.

The builders work together

The three questions explain why NDT calls the roles **builders**. They help constitute the represented relationship. They are not three interchangeable indicators of a pre-existing moral feeling. Intense value cannot substitute for absent agency; a professional role cannot substitute for value; and merely being able to act does not establish a relation to the object. The formal account also preserves separate positive-value-by-agency and negative-value-by-agency interactions. That derived relationship-strength structure combines existing builders; it does not introduce a fourth one.

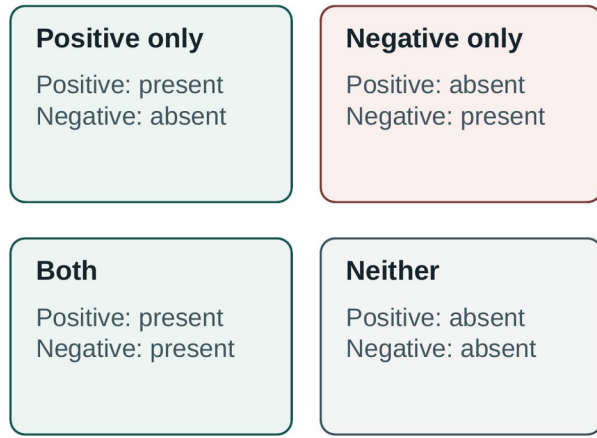
A removal comparison makes the distinct work of the builders visible. Hold the parent's capacity and connection fixed but remove the child's mattering in its own right: the remaining practical reasoning could concern convenience or another instrumental end. Hold value and connection fixed but remove every represented possibility of response: concern remains, but not the agency-involving relationship NDT requires. Hold value and capacity fixed but remove every positioning bridge: the two features no longer supply the exact represented relation. These are contrasts within the proposed architecture, not reports of successful experimental deletion from a person's mind.

The challenge to another account is correspondingly exact. It need not use NDT's words or reproduce the same diagram. It needs to explain the distinctions the decomposition preserves: inherent and merely instrumental significance; opposition and absence of relation; having a response available and merely regarding an outcome; mixed value and indifference. An alternative can distribute the explanatory work differently. Merely matching the final verdict leaves the work unanswered.

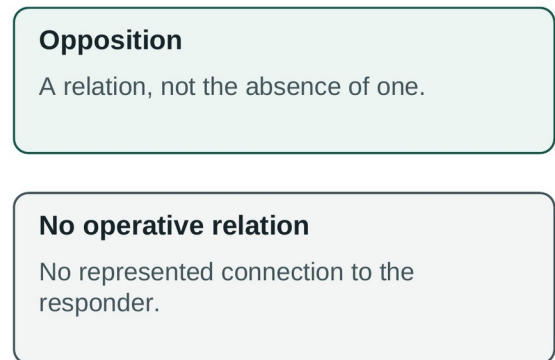
Two distinctions that one good-bad scale would lose

Inherent value

Positive and negative are independent.



Relational Positioning



Opposition does not determine positive or negative value.

Both is not neither. Opposition is not absence.

None of the profiles, by itself, is a complete moral verdict.

Figure 4. Valuing and positioning answer different questions. Positive and negative inherent value can coexist without cancelling. Relational opposition concerns the subject–object connection and does not determine either value component. The display distinguishes represented profiles; it neither measures their prevalence nor assigns blame, virtue, or a final action to a profile.

Having a relationship is not enough

Contributing together

The breakfast contrast gave the parent a continuing relationship with the child in both episodes. Why does NDT still distinguish the judgments? Because possessing a relationship and drawing on the relationship in a particular judgment are different facts.

NDT's term *provenance* refers to the contributing sources and connections of the judgment-forming process. The sources must do more than appear in the person's background knowledge. The represented relationship, the child as the relevant object, and the parent as the responder must jointly shape a requirement, evaluation, or appraisal involved in the judgment. Recognizing a child in one disconnected train of thought and applying a hygiene rule in another does not establish the needed integration merely because both thoughts happen during breakfast.

The exact connections matter as much as their presence. Suppose an observer considers the parent's care for the child while separately thinking about a café employee's food-handling obligations. The observer cannot combine care from the first relation, a responder from the second, and an eventual discard conclusion into evidence for one relationship-supported judgment. NDT requires the same subject and

object to be bound together in the contributing evaluation. The formal restrictions prevent a fluent explanation from assembling its crucial premises out of unrelated pieces.

More than changing the final answer

Actual contribution need not mean that removing one source would change the words of the conclusion. In the care episode, the parent might also apply a hygiene rule. Both sources could help shape the judgment even though either could support discarding on its own. The relationship might determine why serving the milk is unacceptable while the rule supplies an additional practical reason. NDT permits such converging support; it does not demand moral purity or the absence of prudential considerations.

The difference between contribution and an unused alternative nevertheless remains. A relationship cannot make a judgment moral merely by being available as backup. Its represented structure must perform relevant evaluative work in the actual episode. NDT's formal contribution conditions preserve redundant support while excluding routes that are present but do not affect the relevant organization. Establishing those conditions in a formal example is different from discovering whether they hold in a real person.

A general principle can also preserve a relationship's contributing role. A parent's concern may help form a general no-harm requirement, which remains operative when applied to the milk. There is no requirement to reconstruct the entire relationship from the beginning on each occasion. A retained or reactivated representation can carry the relevant organization. What is insufficient is the purely historical observation that a rule, institution, or habit originally arose for moral reasons. A history of concern does not establish what contributes to every later application.

The distinction reaches beyond breakfast. A welfare calculation, a rights principle, or a religious command can participate in moral cognition when a qualifying relationship contributes through the procedure. The same formal procedure can also be used as an exercise or administrative routine without that contribution. NDT's descriptive breadth does not declare every use of every ethical theory moral; it allows different reasoning styles while asking the same question about each judgment's organization.

What changes when the relationship remains

Changing consequences

The relationship structure does not by itself determine everything the parent should do. Keep the child's significance, the parent's connection, and the parent's relevant capacity fixed, but change what the parent believes about the milk. Suppose the parent encounters a claim that, in the proposed circumstances, consuming a small quantity would benefit the child. Within the imagined comparison, accepting the claim changes the expected consequences of serving the milk. The parent's concern for the child can remain fully operative while supporting a different assessment of the options.

The claim is hypothetical, not health advice or a finding about spoiled milk. Its explanatory purpose is to separate the relationship from information about what would help or harm its object. Rejecting the claim as false would be entirely compatible with understanding the contrast. The parent's evaluation depends on what the parent believes, including beliefs the reader has good reason to reject.

NDT calls a downstream influence of the core-preserving kind a **bender**. The metaphor refers to changing what follows from a relationship without changing the relationship's core. For a precise bender comparison, the same subject and object, their construals, both value components, positioning organization, agency, and the relevant qualifying conditions must remain fixed. The relationship must continue to contribute in both the original and comparison cases. Otherwise the comparison could merely replace relational reasoning with an unrelated route while falsely claiming to preserve the relationship's work.

What may change is a particular downstream connection: expected consequences, the description of an action, an applicable requirement, a priority, an appraisal, or the attribution of responsibility. The final answer need not remain fixed; explaining why it changes is often the point. Nor does the bender definition require every remaining condition of a complete moral classification to be invariant. The preservation requirement concerns the exact relationship core and its continuing contribution, not an unexplained promise that nothing else relevant can change.

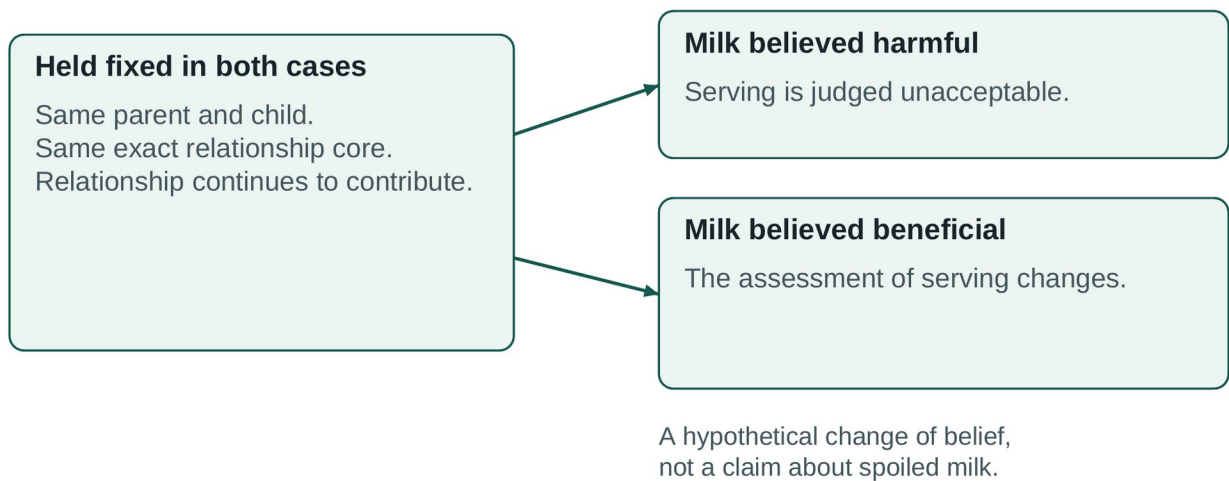
Different roles for the same information

The same information can play different roles. Learning that a person is a patient might establish a physician–patient identity bridge. That operation helps build positioning. Once the relation is in place, a separately represented confidentiality requirement may affect what the physician discloses. The identity and its consequences should not be counted as the same operation. If new information instead changes who the patient is understood to be or how the patient matters, the core itself has changed. The operation is not a bender of that unchanged core.

Ownership provides a useful illustration of why a label cannot settle the role. Someone may understand ownership as stewardship, giving special weight to care; as sovereignty, supporting a claimed permission; or as dominion, diminishing the object's independent significance. Those representations need not have the same structure or the same moral implications. An influence on priority with the core preserved can be bending; an alteration of inherent value or the object's construal changes the core. NDT describes the person's representation without endorsing the asserted permission.

Other influences operate earlier by making an interpretation more likely to become active. A reminder of a group identity can bring a familiar way of viewing the situation to mind without itself serving as a premise in the eventual judgment. NDT calls that salience-shaping role an *attractor*. If the identity also affects a requirement within the selected interpretation, the additional operation needs its own explanation. One piece of information can perform several roles, but a convenient name does not establish all of them at once.

Changing what follows while the relationship remains



The boundary of the comparison

Changing a core feature changes the relationship core.
Losing the relationship's contribution also breaks the bender comparison.

Figure 5. Changing a relationship differs from changing what follows from it. A bender comparison preserves the exact relationship core and its actual contribution while changing a specified downstream operation. A change in value, positioning, agency, or a core-defining construal is a change to the core instead. Equal final verdicts would not prove preservation, and different verdicts would not by themselves disprove it.

Wrongness, responsibility, and the person being judged

Representing another moral subject

So far the parent has judged what the parent should do. Moral cognition also concerns other people and completed actions. Moving to those cases changes the explanatory question; it does not merely replace *I* with *she*.

Imagine the parent observing a stranger about to give the child the same milk. The parent's care explains why the situation attracts attention and why the child's welfare matters. But a judgment that *the stranger ought not to give the child the milk* also represents the stranger as someone who can respond to the child. NDT locates the moral subject of that judgment in the represented stranger–child relation. The parent's own relationship to the child cannot substitute for every feature of the relation under which the stranger is being judged.

The parent might understand the stranger as an adult entrusted with serving breakfast to the child. The paired roles identify the stranger and child; the parent represents the stranger as able to withhold the milk and capable of understanding the child's significance. The stranger need not endorse the parent's judgment. What matters for explaining the parent's appraisal is how the parent represents the stranger and the relation.

Capacity to recognize and integrate the relevant features is distinct from simple capacity to cause an effect. Compare someone who can move an object with someone understood as able to recognize its significance and respond in light of that recognition. NDT requires that attribution when an agent other than the judging person is treated as a moral subject. It analyzes the attribution through recognition of value, relevant relations, possible responses, and their integration in evaluation—not through a circular ability to “see whatever is moral.”

The familiar contrast between condemning an attack by a competent person and reacting to a dangerous animal can help orient the distinction, but entity kind is not the criterion. If a nonhuman agent is represented as having the relevant integrative capacity, nonhuman status alone does not exclude moral subjecthood. If a human is represented as lacking it, humanity alone does not supply it. The explanation concerns the capacities attributed within the judgment, not a universal ranking of species.

Wrongness is not yet blame

Blame requires still more. Suppose the stranger could physically withhold the milk but could not know it was spoiled. Or suppose the stranger was prevented from acting by circumstances the parent recognizes. NDT separates the underlying relation and general response capacity from responsibility for a particular act under a particular requirement. A judgment of blame concerns an act judged wrong overall within the operative decision model and additionally requires represented answerability, control, relevant knowledge, and opportunity. Calling the outcome bad does not perform that additional work.

Praise is similarly more than a favorable reaction. Admiring an outcome differs from crediting someone for bringing it about. NDT reserves its specialized praise judgment for an agent–act appraisal that attributes relevant credit and responsibility. A favorable appraisal without that attribution remains possible; it is not forced into praise merely because the vocabulary sounds positive.

Implicit subjects and concern for oneself

The subject can also be implicit in the sentence. “What happened to the child was wrong” may rest on a representation of a negligent person or institution even though the words do not name the agent. NDT requires the represented subject to contribute to the appraisal; an analyst cannot add a subject simply because the sentence sounds moral. Conversely, an earthquake can be appraised as terrible without any agent being represented as the subject of the event appraisal. Relationships to its victims may support duties to rescue or rebuild, but those judgments introduce responders and are different from the appraisal of the natural event itself.

The distinction between subject and object also permits moral concern for oneself. A person can be represented both as the responder and as the being whose standing or treatment matters. “I can respond” and “my own life matters in its own right” remain different roles even when one person occupies both. Merely using *I* does not make a prudential judgment moral. A judgment about one’s own interests still requires the relationship and contribution conditions; self-reference removes only the need for the separate attribution used when judging another agent’s integrative capacity.

These distinctions make the descriptive purpose of NDT concrete. A judgment can be moral without being correct, can appraise an act negatively without blaming its agent, and can concern oneself without being merely prudential. The different questions should not be compressed into a single good–bad score.

Requirements need not disappear when they are overridden

Competing requirements

One further contrast concerns how standards combine. Suppose the parent has promised to arrive at work on time but encounters an urgent need to obtain safe food for the child. The parent may judge that the child's immediate need takes priority. A promise can remain applicable even when the parent judges that breaking it is warranted. The lateness does not become punctuality, and the unfulfilled commitment need not vanish from the parent's understanding.

NDT distinguishes overriding a requirement from finding that the requirement never applied. The parent might still owe an explanation or apology because the promise was real. Such remaining significance is *residue*: what remains of a violated requirement within the judgment even when another consideration takes priority. The theory represents the priority and its operative support instead of treating the final choice as proof that every competing consideration was rejected.

A different case arises when every available action violates a requirement that remains in force. Imagine that the parent understands two urgent responsibilities as impossible to satisfy together and sees no permitted exception. If the parent has a way to compare the violations, a course can still be selected as the less unacceptable one. Selection does not have to turn the chosen course into something wholly acceptable. NDT calls the structure a tragic choice.

The account does not impose one universal method for resolving tragedy. A person might prioritize a particular requirement, compare severities, or remain without a comparative answer. What NDT does not do is silently erase the requirements as soon as all of them cannot be satisfied. If no represented fallback resolves the comparison, the formal architecture does not manufacture guidance by default.

Challenges to support

Challenges to support must also be distinguished from competing reasons. Evidence that the milk is actually fresh challenges the spoilage belief. Evidence that a claimed study does not bear on the child's circumstances challenges the inference from the study to the decision. A reason to set aside an applicable requirement instead belongs to the priority structure. Contrary information can change a conclusion through several operations; the word *objection* does not identify which operation is occurring.

Those operations depend on what is active in the person's cognition. A challenge an outside observer can imagine does not automatically block a judgment. The person must register a relevant challenge to a premise, connection, or conclusion. NDT's conservative reference implementation withholds support while certain admitted challenges remain undefeated or unresolved. That internal status is not a guarantee of objective truth, and alternative ways of handling challenges remain possible implementations.

The architecture can therefore retain several distinctions within one practical understanding: selected and unselected actions, satisfied and violated requirements, justified exceptions as the person sees them, remaining regret or obligation, and responsibility for particular conduct. A second kind of complexity emerges when the person has more than one practical understanding of the same case.

When the situation itself changes in thought

Interpreting the same event

The chair was initially understood as a project to complete. The breakfast was understood through a parent, a child, and a possible illness. Neither scene arrived as a list of uninterpreted objects. The judgments depended on what the objects, people, and actions were taken to be. NDT calls that coordinated interpretation a *frame*.

Framing is more than attaching a new label to an otherwise fixed decision. Consider the apparently simple description *taking away a chair*. A museum worker might understand the act as removing a damaged object for conservation. A family member might understand the same movement as disposing of an irreplaceable heirloom. The difference includes the object's identity, the point of moving it, the available alternatives, the expected future, and the relationship of the people involved. Before one can decide whether the parties disagree morally, one needs to understand what each party thinks is happening.

Shared abstract values cannot fill every gap. Both parties might value preservation while disagreeing about what counts as preserving the object. Both might value respect while understanding the relevant authority or family connection differently. The issue is not always a different weight assigned to a common value after the scene is fixed. The scene's organization may be part of the disagreement (Beal, 2020).

Raskolnikov's confession

The difference becomes more striking when one person sustains several interpretations. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* supplies a developed case, examined in Beal's dissertation and in *The Polyphony Principle* (Beal, 2018, 2022). The novel develops the competing understandings in enough detail to make their force intelligible.

Raskolnikov is an impoverished former student. His mother and sister also face financial insecurity, and he understands his sister's contemplated marriage to a wealthy man as a sacrifice made partly for the family's survival. He wants to prevent the marriage but sees no satisfactory ordinary way to do so. He murders and robs a pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna, and also kills her sister Lizaveta when she unexpectedly arrives. The victims, his family's predicament, and his ambitions all become part of his attempts to understand the crime.

The confession takes place with Sonya, a young woman supporting her own impoverished family through prostitution. Her religious commitments and self-sacrifice are central to Raskolnikov's understanding of her. She is also a friend of Lizaveta, a fact that makes the confession more than an abstract debate about a hypothetical victim. Raskolnikov has recently helped expose a false theft accusation against Sonya; he knows how vulnerable her family would be if she were imprisoned. He approaches someone whose need to protect her family he understands, but whose way of finding meaning in that responsibility differs sharply from his own.

He begins by asking Sonya to imagine a choice between allowing Luzhin, the man who threatened her family, to destroy the family and acting violently against him to prevent that destruction. In Beal's interpretation, the attempted analogy would allow his own violence to appear as a desperate defense of

loved people. Sonya refuses the proposed terms. Her refusal does not merely lower the weight of a consideration in his calculation; it denies the practical world in which the offered choice was supposed to justify him.

Other explanations follow. Robbery presents the crime through acquisition. Family rescue places the family's future at the center. Outrage at a degrading social order presents aggression as a response to exploitation. The accounts do not simply add motives to one invariant description: each selects a different relation among the act, the victim, the people to be helped, and the person Raskolnikov understands himself to be.

His wish to become a "Napoleon" needs its own context. Raskolnikov has proposed a distinction between ordinary people, who must obey their society's moral rules, and extraordinary people who may transgress in pursuit of an exceptional vision. The question is not only whether the stolen money could do good. The crime becomes a test of whether he belongs to the exceptional category. His inability to live free of torment then bears on his understanding of his own identity. In another account, what he has destroyed is himself.

Calling the crime a test of identity explains neither its justification nor the truth of Raskolnikov's self-understanding. It identifies the question a particular account asks. A literary interpretation can make that structure available for inspection without claiming to reconstruct a measured cognitive process in a real murderer. Beal's interpretation also resists treating the last confession as the one complete explanation that cancels every earlier account. Several explanations can remain meaningful even when none exhausts the case (Beal, 2018, pp. 11–27).

For NDT, the significance is how a change in the represented subject, object, relationship, action, or question changes what can follow. The same physical event can be considered as a means of family rescue, an expression of predatory acquisition, a test of personal standing, or self-destruction.

Understanding the competing judgments requires more than collecting the words *care*, *justice*, and *self-interest*.

Many voices, but not every difference is a conflict

When judgments can conflict

The term *polyphony* means many-voicedness. Its literary use comes from Bakhtin's account of Dostoevsky; Beal's cognitive use concerns several organized perspectives within a person's understanding, rather than treating every perspective as a fragment waiting to be dissolved into one answer (Beal, 2022). NDT calls the normative structure polyphonic when distinct frames support locally coherent judgments about a common case and the judgments are comparable in the relevant respect and conflict.

The comparison requirement matters. One account might say that an act was financially effective and another that it was cruel. Without more, the appraisals can both be true within the person's understanding. They answer different questions. Even recognizing the physical act as the same does not turn financial success and cruelty into opposite positions on one evaluative scale.

Return to the chair taken away from the family home. If one person thinks the worker is moving it temporarily for repair while another thinks it is being permanently discarded, they may initially be judging different represented courses of action. Establishing what the movement is supposed to accomplish is part of making their judgments comparable. If both eventually agree on the planned course but differ about whether it is acceptable, a more direct normative conflict becomes possible.

NDT requires the corresponding bridge in cognition: the relevant acts or targets must be connected, and appraisals must answer a common question or use dimensions made comparable. An analyst's ability to describe a connection is not enough to establish that the person represents it. Where the bridge is absent, NDT records unaligned plurality rather than manufacturing a contradiction.

Raskolnikov's accounts accordingly do not constitute seven interchangeable moral verdicts. A claim about the crime's usefulness and a claim about what it revealed of his personality may remain different appraisals. A justification of the deed and a condemnation of the same deed can become a conflict when they answer the same question of acceptability under connected interpretations. The detailed analysis must establish the connection rather than infer conflict from dramatic language alone.

Several perspectives are not automatically a conflict

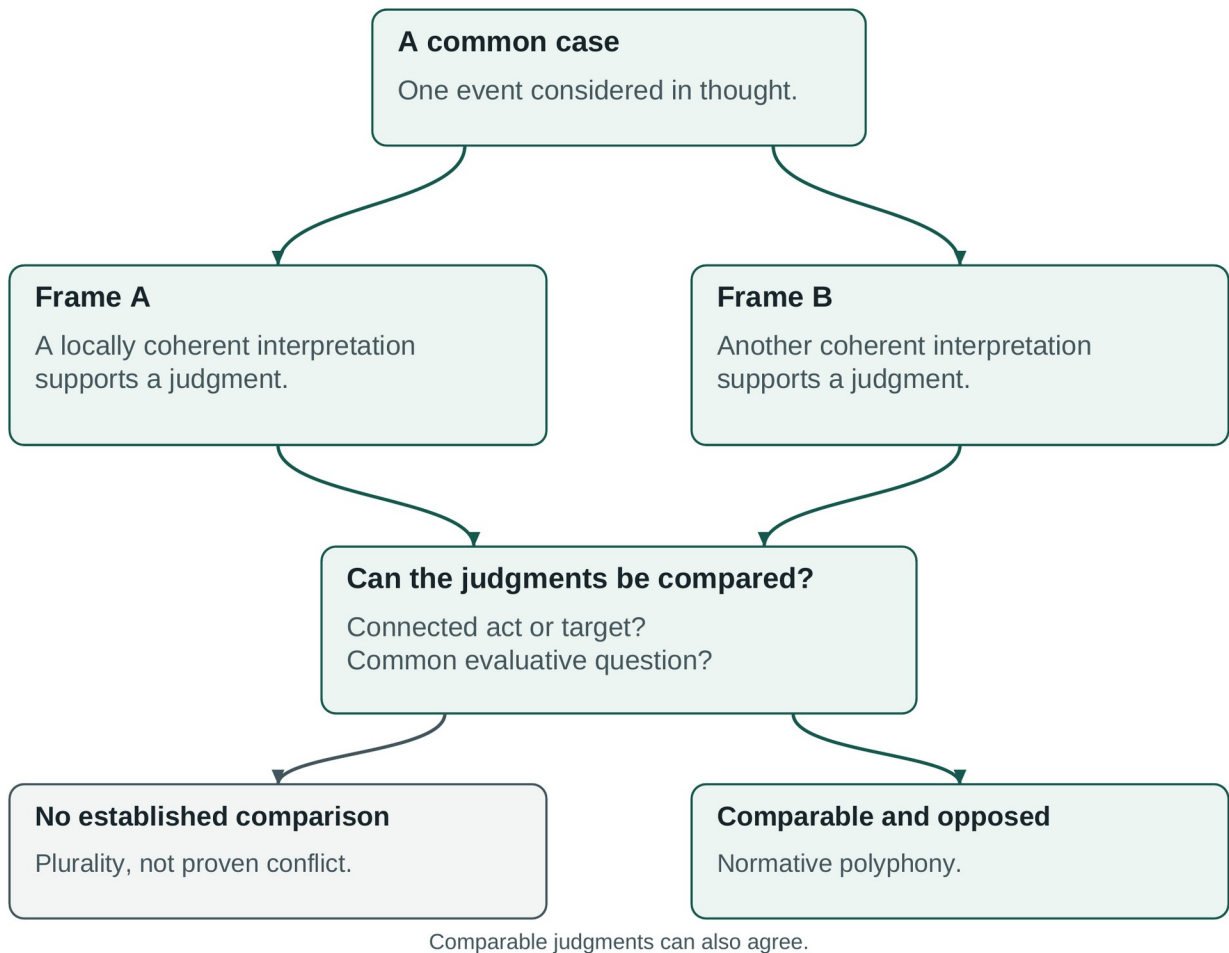


Figure 6. Difference becomes conflict only under the appropriate comparison. NDT distinguishes several interpretations from several incompatible judgments. Identifying a common physical action is sometimes necessary but not sufficient: appraisals may still concern different questions. The diagram represents conditions for comparison, not a claim that cognition must proceed through the boxes in chronological order.

Conflict without a final answer

Polyphony also differs from the earlier tragic choice. In tragedy, one decision model can rank an act as the least unacceptable while retaining its wrongness relative to the model's requirements. Polyphony concerns distinct framed judgments that conflict. A tie among equally good options is different again: choosing one option from an acceptable set does not mean the person receives several incompatible commands to perform every option.

A person may construct a further perspective to compare the conflicting judgments and reach an overall decision. NDT allows such arbitration without requiring it. The further perspective is another organization of thought with its own support, not an infallible referee outside cognition. Its conclusion can be questioned, and a lower-level concern can remain active. Describing a person as rational or reflective does not entitle an interpreter to assume that every conflict has been resolved somewhere out of sight.

The many-voiced structure can illuminate why additional reflection sometimes complicates a judgment. A new interpretation may reveal a previously neglected person, a different understanding of an act, or another responsibility. Equally, a frame can be evasive or poorly supported. Local coherence is not a certificate of truth or moral acceptability. NDT identifies how the perspectives hang together and where they meet; it does not infer that every voice deserves equal endorsement.

What the architecture establishes—and what remains to investigate

Conceptual and formal work

The argument has repeatedly distinguished a judgment from the thinking that produces it. The distinction is not waiting for a laboratory demonstration that thinking differs from outward behavior. It belongs to the explanatory task: an account of cognition asks about the organization through which a conclusion forms, not solely which sentence is spoken or which movement follows. Introspection, imaginative comparison, and careful interpretation can make differences in that organization intelligible.

Recognizing that explanatory level does not, however, establish every proposed account of it. The further claim that NDT's particular relationship structure marks the moral–nonmoral boundary requires an argument. The three builders, the attributed capacities required when another agent is represented as the moral subject, the contribution conditions, and the treatment of framing must earn their place by preserving distinctions, avoiding circularity, and giving a coherent account of cases. Defining a structure precisely makes those commitments inspectable; it does not make the definition uniquely correct by stipulation.

The breakfast comparison performs one part of that work. It allows the reader to hold a sensible conclusion fixed while considering a difference in its contributing basis. The relationship analysis then explains what NDT proposes to find within the relationship-supported route. Removing a builder demonstrates a change within that architecture. The demonstration is conceptual and formal; no experiment has removed a parent's represented intimacy while leaving every other feature of the breakfast cognition intact.

Identifying actual cognition

The same care is needed with introspection. A person may recognize the difference between following a procedure and responding to someone's need without being able to recover every contributing process in a particular occurrence. A retrospective explanation can be incomplete, and a rapid process may not be available for inspection. The conceptual distinction survives those limits, but a confident classification of an actual episode cannot simply borrow the certainty of a stipulated example.

Current empirical methods do not come with an established, high-fidelity procedure for identifying NDT's complete relationship and contribution structure in a person's judgment. A verbal reason, a response-time difference, or a brain measurement is not automatically a reading of the exact route. Combining measures can be useful only when the relations between the measures and the proposed constructs are independently warranted. Naming several techniques does not solve the identification problem.

NDT therefore distinguishes formal consequences from empirical application. The executable companion can be supplied with represented relationships and routes and checked for conformance to specified conditions. Such a check can reveal that a rule wrongly combines information from different subjects or incorrectly treats an unchanged conclusion as absence of contribution. It cannot establish that the supplied structure accurately describes a real parent. Computational execution is evidence about the implementation, not direct evidence about human thought.

Some empirical questions concern narrower, more accessible commitments: how descriptions influence judgment, how people attribute capacities to an agent, or how particular outcome and requirement representations relate to decisions. Other questions concern whether the complete organization occurs in actual cognition and whether grouping judgments by independently identified provenance improves explanation compared with grouping them only by words, behavior, or topic. NDT retains those architecture-level commitments without treating them as experiments ready to run.

For evidence to bear on the complete organization and its explanatory role, identification must precede the desired verdict. A researcher cannot call one route relationship-based because the resulting judgment seems moral, then report the moral result as confirmation of relationship-based cognition. Nor can a failed detection of an implicit subject prove that no subject was represented unless the detection method is adequate for the relevant absence claim. Where available evidence cannot distinguish the alternatives, the appropriate empirical conclusion is unresolved—not a forced classification as moral or nonmoral.

If well-grounded future applications repeatedly fail to identify complete cases, or independently specified provenance distinctions consistently fail to earn their predicted explanatory role, the failures would put pressure on NDT's descriptive application. But present absence of adequate tools is neither a refutation of the thought-behavior distinction nor evidence confirming NDT's proposed architecture. The reasons for adopting a cognitive explanatory level, the adequacy of a specific conceptual analysis, and the success of particular empirical methods must remain distinguishable.

Comparing explanations

A similar discipline governs comparison with other work. NDT does not need every ingredient to be unprecedented. A learning account might explain how particular evaluative weights are acquired; a theory of affect might explain their realization; an account of practical reasoning might describe a procedure that uses them. The question for the complete architecture is what those components jointly explain and whether the relevant moral classification follows from their organization. A topic, doctrine, or process label does not automatically answer the question.

The accompanying Literature Review develops those encounters at the level of specified constructs and claims, with attention to the mature statements of the relevant lineages. The Evidence and Open Questions document distinguishes findings already reported from the additional conclusions they do not establish. The Formal Specification supplies the complete definitions and dependency conditions. Their different jobs allow the present Article to concentrate on the argument without substituting its illustrations for a literature-wide novelty proof or an empirical validation.

From a meaningful situation to a judgment

The chair and breakfast scenes began with actions that seemed straightforward. A closer explanation showed why the practical meaning of the situation mattered: what was being done, what counted as a relevant outcome, who could respond, and which concerns or procedures actually shaped the judgment. The relationship analysis then separated questions that an ordinary word such as *care* can hold together without explaining them.

NDT proposes that moral cognition is a particular organization within normative cognition. Something matters in its own right; a represented responder is related to it and has a relevant capacity; and the bound relationship helps form the operative evaluation. Positive and negative value remain distinct, positioning is not reduced to warmth or distance, and a relationship's existence is not confused with its contribution. Additional beliefs can change what follows, while different frames can change the represented situation itself.

The result is neither a test of moral purity nor a prescription for how everyone should think. A procedure can handle breakfast well without a moral relationship contributing to every judgment. A moral judgment can contain an objectionable interpretation. Several coherent judgments can remain in conflict without being collapsed into a fictitious final answer. What the architecture offers is a way to make such distinctions explicit and connect them within one account.

The central question is no longer simply whether an answer sounds moral. It is how a meaningful situation becomes a judgment, and what makes that formation moral in kind. The strength of NDT's proposal depends on how well the articulated structure answers that question.

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