The Potrayal of Moral Values in *Normal People*: A Study of The Main Characters

Juan Alfian Mattata[1], Ana Rosida[*2]
[1,2,] Universitas Fajar Makassar, Indonesia
*Correspondence: ✉ * anarosida@unifa.ac.id

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to analyze the moral values portrayed by the two main characters in the novel Normal People. This study applies Nicolai Hartmann's theory that define 13 moral values grouped into 3 categories. This research employes descriptive qualitative to analyze the sentences, words, dialogue, and the scene description. The findings reveal seven moral values present in this novel. First group is justice, self-control, and courage. Second group is truthfulness, and trustworthy. Third group is love of the remote, and personal love. It concludes that the presence of these values the novel presents a profound exploration of morality within human relationships, illustrating how ethical principles guide decision-making and emotional growth. By applying Hartmann's moral framework, this research emphasizes that literature not only entertains but also readers can gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of human interaction and use these lessons as a guide in their own lives.

INTRODUCTION

In simple terms, morality is a condition where a person's behavior can be categorized as good or bad. Good morality is when someone behaves well, while bad morality is when someone shows inappropriate behavior. As Maria J. Wantah stated, morality relates to the ability to discern right from wrong and the goodness or badness of behavior, which is inherent in every individual in(Kumparan 2023). Essentially, defining morality is a complex matter because individuals or even groups within society have different views on what morality is and how it should be divided. However, it is clear that morality has a very close relationship with human activities and behavior in society.

Therefore, moral values are very important for every individual in their daily lives and social interactions within the community. In short, these moral values can serve as guidelines or references for someone to lead a better life. One source where someone can acquire these moral values is through literary works. Undeniably, literature is one of the human creations that has the closest connection with society, where such works can be born from the life or background of the author (Rizahra and Supeno 2019). In other words, the author's background significantly influences the work they create. Authors will pour their ideas, creativity, thoughts, and feelings into their works.

One of the most popular forms of literature among the public is the novel. A novel is a fictional narrative typically written in prose form. It tells a story about characters and events, often exploring themes, emotions, and ideas. Novels come in various genres, such as romance, mystery, science fiction, and historical fiction, among others. They are longer and more complex than short stories, allowing for more extensive development of characters and plot. By focusing primarily on the characters and their behaviors within the story, novels can create a touching impression on their readers (Dielarenza Destelita Wahana Putri and Marudut Bernadtua Simanjuntak 2022).

Normal People is a novel by Sally Rooney, published in 2018. This novel tells the story of love, friendship, and self-discovery between Connell and Marianne. In *Normal People,* Sally Rooney portrays an intimate journey between Marianne and Connell, focusing not only on their romantic relationship but also on the complex dynamics of both characters. Marianne is depicted as an intelligent and independent individual, often ignored or excluded by her peers due to her different personality. On the other hand, Connell is a more ordinary-looking individual but possesses deep intelligence and sensitivity. Despite their social class differences, they complement and understand each other. The novel delves into deeper issues such as childhood trauma, depression, and social isolation, affecting both main characters. Marianne and Connell support and inspire each other in their journey to overcome difficulties and find their identities.

Moreover, *Normal People* novel provides a sharp depiction of university student life, the complexity of interpersonal relationships, and the struggle against social expectations. Through their story, readers are invited to reflect on love, growth, and the inevitable mistakes in human relationships. With a subtle and profound writing style, Sally Rooney delivers a thought-provoking and captivating story, allowing readers to connect with the characters and explore deep emotions.

The novel features two central characters, Connell Waldron and Marianne Sheridan, whose complex personalities evolve over time. This character development provides rich material for a moral values analysis. By examining their values, readers can uncover important ethical themes within the story, offering insights that resonate with real-life experiences. These moral lessons can serve as a source of guidance for individuals seeking to understand themselves better and navigate their own journeys of personal growth. As such, the characters' struggles and growth provide relatable role models for those looking to reflect on their own values and identity.

Literature Review

Moral values are the principles or a guideline for every individual on how to act and considered on what's right, good, or ethical by society. Moral values can be an influence on various aspects of a person's life, that includes their behavior, relationship, and their interaction to another person. It is crucial because moral values can shape a person's character and implanting a social harmony. Hartmann said that virtues are the basic of moral values(Hartmann 1932a).

According to Syamaun (2019), moral values is an expression of a person's attitudes. Susana says that moral values is a view of a person that's aligned with normal expectation of good or bad, wrong or right and applying it to other people(E Susana 2018).

Moral values are different from other values, moral values are two connections between personal values and guidelines that address questions about morality in society. Honesty is a form of moral values that has no meaning alone unless it was applied with

other forms of values, economic values can be related to honesty due to its nature (Pratiwi 2019)

Moral values can be categorized into different types. According to Nicolai Hartmann, these values are divided into three distinct groups. The first group includes virtues such as justice, wisdom, courage, self-control, and Aristotelian virtues. The second group consists of values related to social relationships, including brotherly love, Truthfulness and uprightness, Trustworthiness and fidelity, trust and faith, modesty, humility, aloofness, and the values essential for social intercourse. The third group involves more abstract ideals, such as Love of the remote, radiant virtues, personality, and personal love (Hartmann 1932b). These moral values can also be reflected in literary works like a novel.

1. First group such as:

Justice

Justice ensures that everyone is treated the same, providing equal rights and responsibilities for both individuals and the entire community. For examples: When action meets reaction.

Wisdom

Wisdom does not have a specific reference. It tends to be broader, touching only peripherally on the intellectual values of insight, truth, and knowledge.

Courage

Courage is more broadly applicable; it is present in all decisive efforts, steadfast perseverance, and quiet tenacity. This is especially true in situations involving adventure that require personal commitment and demand sacrifice.

Self-control

Self-control is not merely about rejecting or suppressing natural impulses, as if they are inherently evil. It involves transforming and harnessing these natural forces, such as instincts, impulses, emotions, and passions

The Aristotelian Virtues

Aristotle defines virtues as the mean between two extremes of excess and deficiency, both considered evils.

2. Second group such as:

Brotherly Love

Love of one's neighbor is not a general love but is specifically directed towards those who are closest to us.

Truthfulness and uprightness

Truthfulness intended to reflect one's true opinions, convictions, and attitudes, should fulfill this purpose exclusively.

Trustworthiness and fidelity

Reliability and truthfulness both concern trustworthiness, yet they diverge in their methods: reliability is shown through actions, while truthfulness is expressed verbally. Fidelity serves as a genuine test of character: while the unfaithful person regards a promise lightly once made, the faithful individual maintains moral consistency in their interactions with others.

Hartmann suggests that faith and trust require moral courage and strength. Blind faith and trust represent the ultimate test of moral fortitude, serving as the true measure of authenticity in profound human relationships.

Modesty, humility, aloofness.

Modesty is the fundamental virtue that arises from recognizing one's own moral insignificance. This virtue serves as the foundation for the proud ethos of irony. Humility is the ability to acknowledge of one's mistakes and gives a self-criticism or judgement to one's own value. Aloofness aligned with one's worthiness.

The Values of social intercourse

These values pertain more to the outward aspects of human nature, where they exist in the interactions between individuals and the friction of social contact. They do not reach the deeper levels of consciousness where intentions originate.

3. Third group such as:

Love of the remote

Hartmann views love of the remote as a love for what is best, worthiest, and noblest. It is the love for the creative spirit within humanity.

Radiant virtue

Radiant Virtue is not about living a full life, but rather the meaning that life gains through its abundant overflow. It is an unrestrained outpouring that, without losing anything, enriches the human heart. Hartmann also stated that radiant virtues is like a beauty within itself.

Personality

The unity and wholeness of a human being are only fully represented in the concept of the person, which is realized through the expression of values. The highest expression of personhood is the individual's ethical existence, defined by their values and ethos. This unity is established when the perception of value aligns with actions that meet moral demands. Therefore, Hartmann asserted that personality is shaped by values, not the other way around

Personal love

Hartmann notes that love allows one to perceive the ideal person within the real person, as it reveals the true value of the beloved's inner self. This understanding enables the lover to spiritually connect with the intimate depths of the beloved, imparting a transcendental quality to the relationship. Hartman also stated that personal love can become poetic: And love is a mystery that satisfies this deepest and least understood craving. One who loves gives this unique gift to the person he loves. He gives a new dimension to the being of the loved one, enabling him to be for himself,, what otherwise he is only in himself.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research used a descriptive qualitative method to examines the portrayal of moral values in *Normal People* by Sally Rooney, focusing on the two main characters, Connell Waldron and Marianne Sheridan. Using qualitative method can be significant to get deep overall understanding (Levitt et al. 2018). The population for this study consists solely of these two characters, selected through purposive sampling due to their central role in exploring themes of morality, relationships, and personal ethics.

The primary research instrument is textual analysis, where passages from the novel are closely examined to identify moral values as defined by Hartmann's theory. The study follows a structured procedure, beginning with an initial reading of the novel to identify pivotal scenes that demonstrate moral conflict and character development. A second reading is conducted with a focus on Hartmann's ethical categories, categorizing each instance of moral expression according to the theory.

To ensure validity and reliability, multiple readings of the text are conducted to verify the consistency of moral themes. The scope of this study is limited to the moral values exhibited by Connell Waldron and Marianne Sheridan as analyzed through Hartmann's theory. It does not attempt to generalize its findings beyond the novel or apply them to broader sociocultural contexts. Additionally, while Hartmann's theory provides a structured way of interpreting moral values, the study acknowledges the subjective nature of literary analysis and potential variations in interpretation. Nevertheless, by focusing on these two characters, this research offers valuable insights into the moral underpinnings of *Normal People* and contributes to discussions on ethics in contemporary literature.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The moral values that are found within the novel are divided into three groups according to Hartmann. First group is justice, self-control, and courage. Second group is truthfulness and uprightness, and trustworthiness. Third group is love of the remote, and personal love.

1. First group:

a. Justice

In the novel page 72, Connell complaint to Marianne about how hard it is to make friend in Trinity. Connell then said to Marianne that:

> *"Because you're from a rich family, that's why people like you".*

Here, Connell directly addresses an injustice he perceives in his social environment. Unlike Marianne, who comes from a wealthy family, Connell feels alienated at Trinity because of his working-class background. Moreover, Connells is being treated differently and having a hard time to make friends in their new collage because of his poor status, unlike Marianne.

This moment reveals social inequality & the justice value conflict. Connell believes that social status, rather than personal merit, dictates success and belonging at Trinity. He sees Marianne's wealth as an advantage that grants her unearned social acceptance, while he struggles to fit in. According to Hartmann, justice involves recognizing fairness in human relations. Connell's statement suggests that the system at Trinity is unjust, as financial privilege determines social inclusion.

Additionally, Connell experienced Moral Dilemma: Resentment vs. Acceptance. Instead of recognizing that Marianne is also an outsider in other ways, Connell misdirects his frustration at her, making her symbolic of the unfair world he struggles in. His statement reflects emotional honesty but also bitterness, showing that he wrestles with balancing his sense of justice with his personal feelings toward Marianne.

On the page 79, the narrator said:

> *"Rich people look out for each other, and being Marianne's best friend and suspected sexual partner has elevated Connell to the status of rich-adjacent: someone for whom surprise birthday parties are thrown and cushy jobs are procured out of nowhere".*

It indicates that because of Marianne being close to Connell, she elevated peoples' perspective toward Connell and view him as someone who is close to a rich people and help him to get the justice that he deserves. Connell benefits from an unearned rebalancing of justice through his association with Marianne. However, this raises ethical questions about the true nature of justice?

Connell experiences a shift in how he is treated, not because of his abilities or personality, but because of his connection to wealth. The phrase *"rich-adjacent"* highlights that justice is not being granted based on fairness, but rather through social privilege, which contradicts Hartmann's notion of true justice. This moment suggests that justice in an unequal society is often arbitrary, granted to those with the right connections rather than those who truly deserve it.

b. Self-Control and Courage

In the novel page 180, Marianne and her brother (Alan) had a fight resulted in her having a broken nose due to her brother forcefully open her bedroom door that she was holding on to. Because of this, Marianne then called Connell to pick her up in her home. Continue to page 187-188, Connell arrived and saw the Marianne with broken and bloody nose. He then asks about what happened to her and told her to go to wait in his car. Connell then confront Alan and said:

> *"If you ever touch Marianne again, I'll kill you, he says. Okay? That's all. Say one bad thing to her ever again and I'll come back here myself and kill you, that's it."*

Connell's response to Alan's abuse toward Marianne is a striking display of both courage and self-control. Rather than resorting to violence, he asserts himself with measured restraint, delivering a firm warning to Alan. His words serve not only as a protective gesture but also as a clear boundary, making it evident that any further harm toward Marianne will not be tolerated.

According to Hartman's theory of courage, true bravery often involves moral courage—standing up for someone in distress despite potential personal risk. Connell exemplifies this by intervening in a volatile family conflict, knowing he could face retaliation from Alan or disapproval from Marianne's family. However, his priority remains Marianne's safety, and he demonstrates emotional regulation by keeping his composure. Instead of escalating the situation, he positions himself as her protector, using his presence and words as a shield against further harm. His actions reinforce his deep care for Marianne and his willingness to defend her, even at personal cost.

2. Second group

a. Truthfulness

In the novel, Connell and Marianne relationship in high school before they broke up wasn't really known by other people because Connell intentionally tries to hide it because of his anxiety, and at that time Marianne doesn't know it. Skip towards where they meet again in collage, Connell said to Marianne:

> *"I feel guilty for all the stuff I said to you, Connell added. About how bad it would be if anyone found out. Obviously, that was more in my head than anything. I mean, there was no reason why people would care. But I kind of suffer from anxiety with these things. Not that I'm making excuses, but I think I projected some anxiety onto you, if that makes sense. I don't know. I'm still thinking about it a lot.*" (page 74)

Connell demonstrates truthfulness, one of the key moral values outlined in Nicolai Hartmann's ethical framework. By openly admitting his past mistakes and explaining his reasoning, he exhibits moral growth and emotional honesty. In this dialog, Connell is portraying truthfulness by telling Marianne the reason why he avoids telling other people about his relationship with Marianne back in high school.

His confession shows a shift in his moral consciousness—while in high school, he avoided acknowledging his relationship with Marianne due to anxiety and social pressure. However, in college, he recognizes how his actions affected her and takes responsibility. This reflects his personal accountability, as he does not justify his actions but acknowledges that his fears were internal rather than rooted in reality. His emotional honesty is also evident in his words:

"I feel guilty for all the stuff I said to you."

By admitting his emotional conflict, Connell takes a significant moral step forward, as truthfulness requires vulnerability and courage.

b. Trustworthy

Page 74 after Connell tells her the truth, Marianne forgives Connell and he said:

"Thank you. I think I did learn from it. And hopefully I have changed, you know, as a person. But honestly, if I have, it's because of you." Marianne forgives Connell because she sees Connell as a trustworthy person and know that Connell now is not the same like before and will change for the better.

This scene from *Normal People* (page 74) highlights the moral value of trustworthiness through Marianne's decision to forgive Connell and Connell's acknowledgment of personal growth. Connell openly admits his past mistakes, demonstrating honesty—a key component of trustworthiness. By confessing and reflecting on how he has changed, he takes accountability for his actions. His statement, *"I think I did learn from it. And hopefully, I have changed, you know, as a person. But honestly, if I have, it's because of you,"* conveys self-awareness and a sincere desire to improve. According to Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995), trustworthiness is built on three key elements: ability, benevolence, and integrity. Connell's admission of fault and his willingness to change align with the integrity component, which involves honesty and adherence to moral principles.

Marianne's forgiveness is not just an emotional response but an affirmation of Connell's trustworthiness. She recognizes that he is not the same person who once hurt her and believes in his capacity for change. Research by McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) suggests that forgiveness is more likely to occur when the transgressor shows genuine remorse and a commitment to change—both of which Connell demonstrates. By choosing to forgive him, Marianne illustrates that trust can be rebuilt through sincerity and personal growth. Her ability to see Connell's potential for change reinforces the idea that trustworthy people are not those who never make mistakes, but rather those who take responsibility and strive to improve.

Trustworthiness, as a moral value, involves honesty, accountability, and reliability. Connell earns back Marianne's trust by proving that he has learned from his mistakes and is committed to change. This aligns with the findings of Rotenberg (2010), who emphasizes that trustworthiness is not just about keeping promises but also about demonstrating moral consistency over time. This scene illustrates that trust is not solely about avoiding wrongdoing, but also about being genuine, admitting faults, and showing personal growth. Through this moment, *Normal People* emphasizes that trust can be restored when individuals demonstrate true remorse and a willingness to evolve.

3. Third group

a. Love of the remote

In page 78, Connel and Marianne is talking with each other about various things. The narrator said:

> "*The conversations that follow are gratifying for Connell, often taking unexpected turns and prompting him to express ideas he had never consciously formulated before. They talk about the novels he's reading, the research she studies, the precise historical moment that they are currently living in, the difficulty of observing such a moment in process. At times he has the sensation that he and Marianne are like figure-skaters, improvising their discussions so adeptly and in such perfect synchronization that it surprises them both.*"

This scene exemplifies the concept of love of the remote, which refers to an appreciation for abstract ideas, intellectual discussions, and philosophical engagement. Connell and Marianne's conversations are deeply stimulating, allowing them to explore literature, research, and historical contexts in a way that challenges their thinking. The narrator compares their discussions to figure skaters moving in perfect synchronization, emphasizing the fluidity and depth of their intellectual connection. Connell, in particular, finds these conversations gratifying as they prompt him to articulate thoughts he had never consciously formulated before, reflecting the idea that intellectual discourse fosters personal growth and self-awareness (Nussbaum, 1997). According to Bourdieu (1984), shared cultural and intellectual interests contribute to social bonding, reinforcing how Connell and Marianne's mutual love for exploring distant, abstract concepts strengthens their relationship.

Moreover, their conversations serve as a form of emotional and intellectual intimacy, deepening their connection beyond physical attraction. Research suggests that engaging in meaningful discussions fosters relational closeness and understanding (Aron et al., 1997). Connell and Marianne's ability to discuss complex ideas freely and with enjoyment highlights their compatibility, demonstrating that their relationship is built not only on emotions but also on a shared intellectual curiosity. Their love of the remote, expressed through their deep and philosophical dialogues, enriches their bond by allowing them to explore the world and themselves in a way that is both intellectually and emotionally fulfilling.

b. Personal love

Towards the end of the novel (page 195-198), Connel receives an email from university in New York. They offer him a place on the MFA. Because of his relationship and bond with Marianne are now in a good place, he does not want to go and leave Marianne and go to New York.

> "*I can stay, and you can go, she says. It's just a year. I think you should do it.*" says Marianne.
>
> Connel then said "*That's ridiculous, he says. I'm not going to New York without you. I wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for you.*"
>
> "*I'd miss you too much, he says. I'd be sick, honestly.*" Despite that, she keeps encouraging *Connell* to go.
>
> "*She closes her eyes. He probably won't come back, she thinks. Or he will, differently. What they have now they can never have back again. But for her the pain of loneliness will be nothing to the pain that she used to feel, of being unworthy. He brought her goodness like a gift and now it belongs to her. Meanwhile his life opens out before him in all directions at*

once. They've done a lot of good for each other. Really, she thinks, really.
People can really change one another."
"You should go, she says. I'll always be here. You know that."

This scene beautifully illustrates the concept of personal love, which is characterized by selflessness, emotional maturity, and the genuine desire for a loved one's happiness and growth. Marianne, despite her deep love for Connell and her fear of losing him, encourages him to accept the opportunity in New York. Her willingness to let him go demonstrates a profound understanding that true love is not about possession but about supporting the other person's personal and professional aspirations. This aligns with Fromm's (1956) theory of mature love, which emphasizes that love is not about controlling or holding onto someone but about nurturing their growth, even if it requires painful sacrifice.

Moreover, the passage suggests that their relationship has already transformed them both in significant ways. Marianne reflects that while Connell may not return the same, or at all, she no longer feels unworthy of love because of what they have shared. This realization demonstrates the lasting impact of their bond—one that has provided her with a sense of self-worth and emotional fulfillment. Research on personal love suggests that true love involves a balance between attachment and autonomy, where individuals support each other's personal growth rather than clinging to familiarity (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Marianne's final reassurance—*"You should go... I'll always be here. You know that."*—embodies this idea, showing that love is not about holding someone back but about trusting in the strength of their connection regardless of distance. This moment encapsulates how personal love fosters emotional independence and transformation, making it one of the novel's most poignant expressions of love's depth and selflessness.

CONCLUSION

In *Normal People*, Sally Rooney explores a range of moral values that shape the characters' actions and relationships, aligning with Hartmann's categorization. The first group—justice, self-control, and courage—is exemplified through the characters' responses to personal conflicts and their ability to stand up for themselves and others. The second group—truthfulness and trustworthiness—is evident in Connell and Marianne's evolving relationship, where honesty and personal growth play a crucial role in rebuilding trust. The third group—love of the remote and personal love—demonstrates their intellectual connection and the selflessness in their love, particularly in moments of sacrifice and emotional support.

Through these values, the novel presents a profound exploration of morality within human relationships, illustrating how ethical principles guide decision-making and emotional growth. The characters' experiences reflect real-life moral dilemmas, showing the importance of integrity, courage, and love in shaping personal development. These values serve not only to enrich the narrative but also to offer readers meaningful insights into moral reasoning and ethical behavior. By analyzing these themes, readers can gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of human interaction and use these lessons as a guide in their own lives.

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