

PART ONE

*The Nature of Morality and the Development  
of Social Values*

## CHAPTER ONE

*Morality and Domains of Social Knowledge*

In my education classes, I often start off by asking students to state what they would consider to be the highest, most moral act. Invariably, students propose risking one's life to save the life of another as the most moral thing a person could do. I then present them with the following scenario and ask whether it is similar to what they had in mind.

A man is waiting at a train station. On his right, about twenty feet away, stands a woman reading a magazine. The man glances to his left to check if a train is coming and sees to his horror that another man, about twenty feet from him, is in a crouched position clearly aiming a gun at the woman. The man is too far away to either push the woman or stop the shooter. So he yells out "duck" as he steps between the shooter and the woman just as the gun is fired. As a result, the bullet intended for the woman strikes him in the arm, saving the woman's life.

Generally, my students accept this scenario as a rather dramatic instance of what they had in mind. I then ask them to consider the following alternative scene.

The same people are on the train platform in the same relative positions as in the first version. However, the man in the middle is in this case unaware of the presence of the gunman. While waiting for the train, he notices that his shoe is untied. Just at the moment that our "hero" bends forward to tie his shoe, the gunman fires at the woman. The bullet hits him in the arm, and the woman's life is saved.

Despite the fact that the behavior of the "hero" (moving in between the shooter and the woman) and outcome (woman is saved) are the same, my students do not consider the second scenario as a depiction of a moral ac-

tion. This is because there was no element of moral choice involved in the second set of events. The decision to move forward was unrelated to the moral elements of the situation, and the moral outcome (preservation of life) occurred quite by accident. On the basis of this example, my students conclude that moral action as opposed to an accidental or reflexive behavior requires moral judgment.

Now some objections may be raised to the interpretation the students offer with regard to this example. First, it may be argued that the act of saving someone's life is an instance of supererogation (performing beyond the call of duty) and is not an example of action based on moral obligation (e.g., to refrain from harming another). This objection does not, however, negate the importance that the students placed on volition as a necessary element of moral action, and no one would argue that the act of saving someone's life is without moral meaning. A second, and more pointed, objection would be to accept the example as portraying a moral action, but to argue that even in the first instance the person was not acting on the basis of rational choice, but did so out of instinct or emotion. This position makes clear that emotion plays an important role in morality. Moreover, this interpretation reminds us of how many everyday moral actions seem to take place automatically without reflection.

In fact, some recent writers have placed great emphasis on the apparent lack of reflection in everyday moral activity, and have argued that morality is guided by an inherited emotional "moral sense" (Wilson 1993). The role of affect and emotion in the selection and motivation of moral action will be taken up again more thoroughly in a later chapter. For our purposes here, it is enough to recognize that the fact that a judgment is made quickly, and seemingly without reflection, does not necessarily mean that it was made "unthinkingly." It takes little reflection, for example, for an adult to answer the question, "How much is one plus one?" The seeming automaticity of the response does not negate the answer as a product of thought, however quickly done. Similarly, while moral actions may be motivated by emotion, and take place with very little conscious reflection, they always involve an element of thought. This is why we don't consider the "prosocial" behavior of animals (e.g., placing their own lives at risk in order to protect their young) to be truly moral. We attribute such behavior to instinct rather than to the animal's morality. Indeed, if our hero were acting solely out of instinct or automatic emotional processing, my students would not consider his behavior to have had any more "moral" status than that of the man who saved the woman's life by accident.

At the core of what we mean by morality, then, is knowledge of right

and wrong. Conduct is moral if it involves selection of particular courses of action that are deemed to be right. In the above example, if we were to shift our focus from the “hero” to the shooter, we would quickly see that the person’s moral culpability stems from his choice to harm another person. If it were to turn out that the shooter were delusional and incapable of understanding the meaning of his actions, we would view the events as tragic rather than in moral terms. Thus, while the human experience of morality may contain many things, such as emotions (which may be rooted in our evolutionary history), the defining element of morality is moral cognition. Moreover, our deliberations about right and wrong are not confined simply to those things we do seemingly automatically out of habit, or out of an emotional sense that a course of action is right. Moral issues are among the most engaging things that people think about. It isn’t just philosophers who reflect on moral issues. Just about everyone has pondered the morality of various courses of action and reflected upon the moral meaning of personal decisions. This begins very early in life in the context of deciding on issues of fairness among playmates and siblings, and continues into the twilight concerns over death with dignity.

#### IDENTIFYING THE MORAL DOMAIN

One of the central questions raised by philosophy and psychology is whether morality constitutes a domain or category of understanding distinct from other aspects of our knowledge. The behaviorist theories of learning, which at one time dominated American educational practice, made no distinctions among types or forms of knowledge and saw all learning as simply the acquisition of content or procedures resulting from environmental consequences experienced as reinforcements or punishments (Skinner 1971). From that perspective there was no particular difference between an academic subject like arithmetic and morality, and the issue of moral education became simply the application of educational technology to generate a set of socially defined and desired behaviors. More recently, however, as a consequence of what has been called the “cognitive revolution,” there has been a recognition that knowledge is not uniform but is structured within different domains or conceptual frameworks. Verbal and mathematical knowledge, for example, are not reduced to one another, and the teaching of reading and arithmetic call upon different curricula and teaching strategies.

While it may seem fairly obvious that moral cognition is something different from mathematics or text comprehension (reading), it has been less

apparent that morality is a domain apart from knowledge of other social values. For the most part, researchers and educators have accepted the everyday usage of the term *morality* (standards of social right and wrong) as defining the field of inquiry or instruction. Moral education, according to this conventional view, involves the socializing of students into socially accepted standards of behavior so that they learn to know “right” from “wrong” (Ryan 1996). This global approach draws no distinctions among very disparate forms of social right and wrong, and it offers no criteria for inclusion or exclusion within the moral category of social norms. Behaviors as different as harm to another person and failure to wear conventional dress are both considered “wrong” and, therefore, subject to moral socialization. Thus, there is no sense in which morality is viewed in this conventional perspective as something apart from knowledge of social norms in general.

Within philosophy, however, attempts have been made to establish criteria for determining what *ought* to count as a moral value. According to formalist ethics<sup>1</sup> (e.g., Dworkin 1977; Frankena 1978; Gewirth 1978; Habermas 1991), this notion of *ought* carries with it two related ideas. One is that what is morally right is not something that is simply subject to individual opinion but carries with it an “objective” prescriptive force. The second, related idea, is that what is morally right, because it is “objectively” prescriptive, holds generally and can be universalized across people. These two criteria, prescriptivity and universality, are linked together in philosophical analyses to issues of human welfare, justice, and rights.<sup>2</sup>

What we have learned through research over the past twenty-five years is that people in general, and not just philosophers, also do not hold global conceptions of social right and wrong, but reason very differently about matters of morality, convention, and personal choice (Nucci 1977, 1996; Turiel 1983). More specifically, these conceptual differences become apparent when people are asked to evaluate different actions in terms of criteria similar to those set out in formalist ethics.

<sup>1</sup> Formalist ethics is not the only philosophical system to be concerned with definitions of morality. I bring in formal criteria here as a way of illustrating the basic distinctions that can be made between morality and the conventions of society. These same kinds of distinctions are also made by children and adults in their own natural reasoning about social and moral issues. People also combine formalist with nonformalist ideas in their moral cognition. Some of these nonformalist aspects of everyday morality will be brought into the discussions in later chapters about emotion and moral character.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Gilligan (1982) has made a strong case for care as an alternative moral orientation to a morality of justice. I will take up the issue of care and morality in the Chapter 6 discussion of the role of affect in morality.

Within the domain theory of social development, morality refers to conceptions of human welfare, justice, and rights, which are a function of the inherent features of interpersonal relations (Turiel 1983). As such, prescriptions pertaining to the right and wrong of moral actions are not simply the function of consensus or the views of authority. For example, it is not possible to hit another person with force and not hurt that other person. That is because hurting is an inherent consequence of hitting. A moral judgment about unprovoked harm (“It is wrong to hit.”) would not be dependent on the existence of a socially agreed-upon norm or standard but could be generated solely from the intrinsic effects of the act (i.e., hitting hurts). In this example, the prescriptive force of the moral standard “It is wrong to hit.” is objective in the sense that the effects of the act are independent of the views of the observer, prescriptive in the sense that the issue of wrong stems from the objective features of the act, and generalizable in the sense that the effects of the act hold across people irrespective of background. Similar analyses could be done regarding a broader range of issues pertaining to human welfare that would extend beyond harm to concerns for what it means to be just, compassionate, and considerate of the rights of others. In studies on reasoning about a broad range of issues, it has been found that moral judgments are structured by the person’s understandings of fairness and human welfare (Turiel 1983).

In contrast with issues of morality are matters of social convention. Conventions are the agreed-upon uniformities in social behavior determined by the social system in which they are formed (Turiel 1983). Unlike moral prescriptions, conventions are arbitrary because there are no inherent interpersonal effects of the actions they regulate. For example, among the many conventions children in our society are expected to learn is that certain classes of adults (e.g., teachers, physicians) are addressed by their titles. Since there are no inherently positive or negative effects of forms of address, society could just as easily have set things up differently (e.g., had children refer to their teachers by first names). Through accepted usage, however, these standards serve to coordinate the interactions of individuals participating within a social system by providing them with a set of expectations regarding appropriate behavior. In turn, the matrix of social conventions and customs is an element in the structuring and maintenance of the general social order (Searle 1969).

These two forms of social regulation, morality and convention, are both a part of the social order. Conceptually, however, they are not reducible one to another and are understood within distinct conceptual frameworks or domains. This distinction between morality and convention is nicely il-

illustrated by the following example (collected in the U.S. Virgin Islands during the research for Nucci, Turiel, and Encarnacion-Gawrych 1983) taken from an interview with a 4-year-old girl regarding her perceptions of spontaneously occurring transgressions at her preschool.

*MORAL ISSUE: Did you see what happened? Yes. They were playing and John hit him too hard. Is that something you are supposed to do or not supposed to do? Not so hard to hurt. Is there a rule about that? Yes. What is the rule? You're not to hit hard. What if there were no rule about hitting hard, would it be all right to do then? No. Why not? Because he could get hurt and start to cry.*

*CONVENTIONAL ISSUE: Did you see what just happened? Yes. They were noisy. Is that something you are supposed to do or not supposed to do? Not do. Is there a rule about that? Yes. We have to be quiet. What if there were no rule, would it be all right to do then? Yes. Why? Because there is no rule.*

As I stated earlier, the distinction between morality and nonmoral norms of social regulation, such as convention, has not been generally made in values education. Traditional values educators, such as Kevin Ryan (1996) and Edward Wynne (1989), hold that moral values are established by society. They treat all values including morality as matters of custom and convention to be inculcated in children as a part of what they refer to as character education. The kind of distinction drawn here is also at variance with accounts that have had the greatest impact on developmental approaches to moral education. In contrast with behaviorism and traditional approaches to moral education, the accounts of moral development offered by Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1984) were informed by and included philosophical distinctions between morality and convention. However, while differing in their interpretations of the ages at which such changes take place, both Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1984) maintained that only at the highest stages of moral development can morality be differentiated from and displace convention as the basis for moral judgments.

Over the past twenty-five years, however, more than sixty published articles have reported research demonstrating that morality and convention emerge as distinct conceptual frameworks at very early ages and undergo distinct patterns of age-related developmental changes. This research is reviewed in detail in Helwig, Tisak and Turiel 1990; Smetana 1995a; Tisak 1995; and Turiel 1998a. Three main forms of evidence have been offered in support of the contention that morality is a conceptual sys-

tem distinct from understandings of nonmoral social norms. The first consists of studies examining whether or not individuals make conceptual distinctions between moral and nonmoral social issues on the basis of a number of formal criteria. The second form of research consists of observational studies of children's social interactions to determine if the pattern of social interactions associated with moral issues is different from the form of social interactions around nonmoral issues. The third form of research has examined the age-related changes in the ways in which people reason about moral and nonmoral concerns. Most of the attention of each of these three forms of research has been upon the distinction between matters of morality and social convention. Other work has looked at the development of understandings of personal prerogative and issues of self-harm (prudence). Those latter issues will be dealt with in detail in chapter 3. What follows is an overview of the research on the moral–conventional distinction.

#### RESEARCH ON THE MORAL AND CONVENTIONAL DOMAINS

##### Studies of the Moral–Conventional Distinction

The way in which researchers have determined whether or not people make a conceptual distinction between morality and convention has been by asking people to evaluate various actions in terms of one or more of the following criteria:

*Rule contingency:* Does the wrongness of a given action depend upon the existence of a governing rule or social norm? (The reader will recognize this criterion from the interview with the 4-year-old child described above.)

*Rule alterability:* Is it wrong or all right to remove or alter the existing norm or standard?

*Rule generalizability:* Is it wrong or all right for members of another society or culture not to have a given rule or norm?

*Act generalizability:* Is it wrong or all right for a member of another society or culture to engage in the act if that society/culture does not have a rule about the act?

*Act severity:* How wrong (usually on a 5-point scale) is a given action?

For the most part, these criteria map onto the formal criteria for morality presented by formalist ethics. Rule contingency and rule alterability both

refer to the philosophical criterion that a moral norm be prescriptive. Rule and act generalizability both refer to the philosophical criterion that the moral norm apply universally to all persons.

In addition to being asked to make criterion judgments, people are also asked to provide justifications for the answers they give. These justifications allow researchers to determine which substantive bases people employ to make their criterion judgments. In the example presented earlier, the young girl responded to the rule contingency question about hitting by responding that it would be wrong to hit, whether or not a governing rule were in effect. The substantive justification for judging hitting as wrong was that hitting has harmful effects on another person.

In order to gain clear-cut answers to whether or not people make distinctions between morality and convention, researchers have asked people to make judgments that would constitute prototypical examples of moral or conventional issues. Issues have been presented in contexts in which the acts in question are generally not in conflict with other types of goals or events. More complex issues involving conflict and overlap have also been studied, and I will discuss that work in Chapters 4 and 5. In studies which have involved observations of children's interactions, children have been asked to evaluate real situations they had just witnessed (as in the previous example). In most cases, however, issues have been presented in story or pictorial form. The types of issues used as moral stimuli have had to do with welfare and physical harm (for instance, pushing, shoving, hitting, and killing), psychological harm (such as teasing, hurting feelings, ridiculing, or name calling), fairness and rights (such things as stealing, breaking a promise, not sharing a toy, or destroying others' property), and positive behaviors (things like helping another in need, sharing, or donating to charity).

Consistent with the assumptions of domain theory, children and adults distinguish between morality and convention on the basis of these criteria. Moral issues are viewed to be independent of the existence of social norms and generalizable across contexts, societies, and cultures. Social conventions, on the other hand, are rule dependent, and their normative force holds only within the social system within which the rule was formed. Justifications people give for their criterion judgments are also in line with the distinctions that have been drawn between the moral and conventional domains. Judgments of moral issues are justified in terms of the harm or unfairness that actions would cause, while judgments of conventions are justified in terms of norms and the expectations of authority.

There are, as one would expect, age and experience effects on the abil-

ity of people to make these domain distinctions. The youngest age at which children have been reported to differentiate consistently between morality and convention is 2 1/2 years (Smetana and Braeges 1990). The toddlers in the Smetana and Braeges (1990) study were more likely to generalize moral issues across contexts (view such issues as unprovoked hitting of another child as wrong both at home and at another day-care setting) than they were to generalize conventions (putting toys away). They did not, however, make distinctions based on any of the other dimensions used in that study. By about age 3 1/2, however, children treated moral and conventional issues differently on the basis of several criteria, including seriousness and rule contingency, as well as generalizability.

The same study demonstrated that children are capable of making rudimentary distinctions between issues of morality and convention during the third year of life. This study and other work (Nucci and Turiel 1978; Smetana 1981) have demonstrated that by age 4, children have developed fairly consistent and firm differentiations between familiar moral and conventional issues encountered in home or preschool settings. As children become older, their understandings of moral and conventional issues are extended beyond events with which the children have had direct personal experience to include the broad range of issues, familiar and unfamiliar alike, which constitute moral and conventional forms of social events (Davidson, Turiel, and Black 1983). Moreover, as children develop, they become better able to apply more abstract criteria, such as cross-cultural generalizability, to differentiate between issues within the two domains.

Studies that examine whether children differentiate between morality and convention have not been limited to the United States or Western contexts, but have been conducted across a wide range of the world's cultures. Such studies have been conducted with children and adolescents in northeastern Brazil; preschool children in St. Croix, the Virgin Islands; Christian and Moslem children in Indonesia; urban and kibbutz Jewish children and traditional village Arab children in Israel; children and adults in India; children and adolescents in Korea; Ijo children in Nigeria; and children in Zambia. (For a complete listing of these studies see Smetana 1995a or Turiel 1998a.) With some variations in specific findings regarding convention, the distinction between morality and convention has been reported in each of the cultures examined. Only one study (Shweder et al. 1987) has claimed to have obtained data indicating that individuals within a non-Western culture (members of a temple village in India) make no distinction between morality and convention, and that result has been disputed by findings from a subsequent study (Madden