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Edited by Melanie Killen and Daniel Hart

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Introduction: Perspectives on morality in everyday life

Daniel Hart and Melanie Killen

Morality in its various forms is a dominant influence on the conduct and evaluation of day-to-day life. The pervasiveness of the moral domain can be detected in nearly every aspect of life: Appeals to rights and responsibilities are found in the discourse occurring in every sphere of social life; moral commitments shape the goals and aspirations that give direction to individuals' lives; moral judgments are constituent elements in the determination of appropriate courses of action in situations involving opposing values; and the patterning of emotions (e.g., shame, guilt) within an individual often is influenced by engagement with moral issues. It is because of its centrality in understanding human affairs that morality has received such focused attention from scholars in a wide variety of disciplines (psychology, anthropology, sociology, education, government, and philosophy). Our goal for this volume was to bring together the best of the recent work by psychologists interested in morality.

Psychological research of the past decade has primed the field for a focused discussion of morality. The cumulation of findings has provided the foundation for a number of fruitful efforts to explain when, how, and why persons act morally. In our view, much of the psychological research on morality can be framed within three issues: (1) the role of judgment, (2) developmental acquisition and transformation, and (3) moral integration and character. Each of the chapters in this book addresses these issues in varying ways; there is broad consensus among authors concerning the role of judgment, substantial agreement concerning the importance of developmental acquisition and transformation, and a range of perspectives concerning moral character. In this chapter, the connection of these issues both to morality in everyday life and to the various chapters that follow is outlined.

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[More information](#)**Judgment in morality**

A fundamental question for psychological and philosophical analysis of morality in everyday life is this: Do persons make reflective judgments about the real moral issues of daily life that in turn guide behavior? Many influential philosophers and psychologists believe that persons do make reflective judgments in the course of daily life. Kant (1785/1959), for instance, believed that when faced with a moral problem in daily life persons frequently judge whether a line of action is an appropriate response by asking themselves, What would be the consequence if *everyone* did this? with the result of this hypothetical reflective judgment influencing behavior. In psychology, Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1969, 1984) reached a similar conclusion and studied the ways in which reflective moral judgments are transformed over the course of development. Most of the major psychological accounts of morality of the past 20 years have expanded on these traditions and, in so doing, have accorded judgment a central role in human morality.

Whereas psychologists substantially agree that judgment is an essential component of a full account of moral life, nonpsychologists who are unfamiliar with current psychological research often reject such a conclusion. Frequently, these critics base their rejection of judgment on “behavioristic” interpretations of the role of emotion that have their roots in Hume (1739/1969) and contemporary advocates among Blum (1987) and Murdoch (1970). Emotivist philosophies are taken to demonstrate that moral emotions control behavior directly and are unmediated by judgment. From these positions critics, such as J. Q. Wilson (1993), conclude that moral reasoning is unimportant in real moral life:

When people act fairly or sympathetically it is rarely because they have engaged in much systematic reasoning. Much of the time our inclination toward fair play or our sympathy for the plight of others is immediate and instinctive, a reflex of our emotions more than an act of our intellect, and in those cases in which we do deliberate (for example, by struggling to decide what fair play entails or duty requires in a particular case), our deliberation begins, not with philosophical premises (much less with the justification for them), but with feelings – in short with a moral sense. The feelings on which people act are often superior to the arguments that they employ. (pp. 7–8)

What gives rise to this noncognitive (behavioristic) emphasis on the emotions as the key to morality? Biologically directed emotions are attractive because they appear to permit the construction of theories of human morality that derive directly from physiology and anatomy. Emotion-based theo-

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ries offer naturalist and evolutionist views of human ethical conduct according to which morality is just one more quality of persons (such as the human thumb opposing the fingers, or widened feet to permit upright walking) offering an adaptational advantage that leads to its universal presence in the species. Morality could then be directly linked to sociobiology and the study of evolution, thereby gaining scientific credence for the topic as an area of study.

The rejection of reflective judgment in favor of emotions also reflects the deep distrust many psychologists have for persons' construals of self and the world. This distrust is the legacy of both past and current trends in the field: the individual's sense of the self and the world first came under scrutiny from Freud (1930/1961) and his colleagues, who suggested that the important forces driving a person were "unconscious" and not available to self-reflection. This same sort of bias continues in the current cognitive zeitgeist where the information processing constituting much of psychological functioning is thought to consist of "cognitively impenetrable" skills, which operate out of conscious awareness (see Hart, 1992, for a discussion). Psychologists come to view the essence of human nature as that which is outside of the limits of consciousness. Emotions, because they appear to be automatic reactions subject to intentional modulation but not elimination or redirection, become windows to the human soul (hence the fascination with polygraphs as measures of truth-telling, etc.).

We believe this to be a problematic trend for accounts of morality for several reasons. First, the demotion of reflective reasoning risks being imperialistic, restricting thoughtful consideration of moral judgments to Western philosophers and denying it to the "masses" who are judged to respond mindlessly to environmental stimuli (Putnam, 1990). Second, it may be true that persons lack awareness of their own Oedipal complexes (to give a Freudian example) or availability biases (for a cognitive example). But moral regulation is unusually public: Persons discuss and argue about which lines of action are morally correct, and how such judgments can be aligned with legal codes, religious obligations, and the expectations of particular relationships. These exchanges pervade human social life. Under such conditions reflective access to moral principles undoubtedly is widened.

Fundamentally, however, the banishment of judgment and the reification of emotions as the source of morality is incomplete: Both conceptually and empirically this route fails to arrive at a satisfactory account. Charles Taylor (1989) has described other reasons for efforts to dispense with judgment in accounts of morality:

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An important strand of modern naturalist consciousness has tried to hive . . . [judgment] off and declare it dispensable or irrelevant to morality. The motives are multiple: partly distrust of all such ontological accounts because of the use to which some of them have been put, e.g., justifying restrictions or exclusions of heretics or allegedly lower beings. And this distrust is strengthened when a primitivist sense that unspoiled human nature respects life by instinct reigns. But it is partly also the great epistemological cloud under which all such accounts lie for those who have followed empiricist or rationalist theories of knowledge, inspired by the success of modern natural science. (p. 5)

The cynicism about human reason and the belief in innate human qualities to which Taylor points as reasons for the abandonment of judgment in discussions of human morality are, he believes, unfortunate because it is impossible to achieve a satisfactory account of ethical conduct with some attention to judgment. Taylor writes:

Our moral reactions . . . have two facets, as it were. On one side, they are almost like instincts, comparable to our love of sweet things, or our aversion to nauseous substances, or our fear of failing; on the other, they seem to involve claims, implicit or explicit, about the nature and status of human beings. From this second side, a moral reaction is an assent to, an affirmation of, a given ontology of the human.

Taylor argues that if it were the case that moral reactions were merely instincts, then there would be little interest in considering the nature of the objects that elicited these reactions. Nausea, for instance, is elicited by particular environmental stimuli: Taylor points out that persons do not ordinarily argue whether one should or ought to be nauseous in response to a particular stimulus. However, the commonness of moral discussion and argument (p. 6) about what objects in the world deserve a moral reaction demonstrates that moral reactions *are* significantly different; moral reactions, Taylor suggests, necessarily reflect judgments about the nature of humans. Further, pointing to the importance of judgment in moral development does not demote the essential role that moral emotions play in the developmental process. Many investigators have shown that children use moral emotions as significant information, which they use to make judgments about the impact that their actions have on others (see Arsenio and Lover, Chapter 3, this volume; Dunn, 1988; Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988).

A full account of morality must therefore be centrally concerned with judgment. Many of the chapters in this volume discuss in detail the nature of moral and social judgments in the specific contexts of daily life. This analysis takes place at two interrelated levels: cultural and relational. Moral thought and behavior develops in persons living in social groups that have historically transmitted norms, beliefs, and traditions. One of the challenges taken on by researchers in the past 20 years is the specification

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of the ways in which such cultural traditions influence social and moral judgments so as to influence the types of social and moral judgments made from persons of different cultural backgrounds. Although there is as yet no final answer to this question, considerable progress is being made, as chapters by Miller and Bersoff (Chapter 8, this volume) and Wainryb and Turiel (Chapter 9, this volume) demonstrate.

Specific relationships also influence the ways in which persons judge moral and social issues. Persons are involved in a range of relationships, each of which has different expectations and responsibilities: Children, for instance, must be able to regulate interactions with peers, resolve conflicts with parents, negotiate their obligations to social institutions like school, and so on. Each relationship context poses moral and social problems that elicit judgments attuned to both the unique features of the particular relationship and the general features of prototypical relationships. The consequence is that from a young age humans make moral judgments that reflect the relational context in which they occur. Many of the chapters that follow examine the differentiation of judgment across relational contexts.

Acquisition and developmental transformations of morality

How is morality acquired? Originally, the predominant explanations of the acquisition of morality focused on the role of the parents as transmitters of values to children. For example, Freud's explanation was tied to the formation of the superego which was a result of identifying with, and incorporating, parental values. Learning theorists assumed that morality was acquired through conditioning; parental use of rewards and punishments served as the mechanism by which children adopted parental values. One of the important aspects of Piaget's (1932) moral judgment theory was to point out that parents are but one source of morality. Piaget postulated that peers play an important role because relations of equality (peers) are more central for constructing an understanding of equality than are relations of constraint (parent-child). Further, Piaget's theory of acquisition was social-cognitive; children construct categories of equality and fairness based on their active reflection of their own experiences – in particular, ones that are cooperative in nature.

Research over the past several decades has revealed the multitude of experiences that are important for the acquisition of morality. These include diverse peer experiences, adult-child interactions, and cultural influences. Most theorists investigate how children interpret their experiences, acknowledging that the child's assimilation of, and reflection upon, social experiences as central to understanding how the experience plays a role in

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the child's acquisition of moral judgment (see Turiel, Killen, & Helwig, 1987, for a review). Early peer experiences that are considered to be important include reactions to the distress of peers (Hoffman, 1982; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990) and sympathetic and empathetic responses to others (Eisenberg, 1982). Rather than viewing the young child as passive, research has shown that the young child actively constructs social and moral categories based on these diverse experiences (Damon, 1983; Turiel, 1983; Youniss, 1980).

Yet, some theorists dismiss the role of cognition in the child's moral acquisition process. Again, Wilson (1993), to use his writings as an example of a current nonpsychological perspective, offers a behavioristic explanation for ethical development:

Children do not learn morality by learning maxims or clarifying values. They enhance their natural sentiments by being regularly induced by families, friends, and institutions to behave in accord with the most obvious standards of right conduct—fair dealing, reasonable self-control, and personal honesty. A moral life is perfected by practice more than by precept; children are not taught so much as habituated. (p. 249)

The implicit folk theory in Wilson's argument is that children can be trained to become moral citizens through rewards and punishments; reinforcement by parents, friends, and social institutions will be sufficient to establish ("habituate") the correct patterns of behavior in children. As our argument for the centrality of judgment in morality made clear, we believe that this view is in error. Children, like adults, interpret their worlds and make action-determining judgments based on their understanding. Strangely, Wilson ignores the voluminous body of research showing that children interpret, evaluate, and reflect on messages and directives communicated by parents and society in myriad ways.

For example, current research has shown that the acquisition of morality is not a straightforward, unidirectional transmission process (see Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Maccoby & Martin, 1983) but a bidirectional one (children influence parents and vice versa). Training and habituation have not been shown to be mechanisms that facilitate moral behaviors. Parental use of reinforcement does not always promote moral behavior (e.g., parental attempts to encourage sharing in toddlers does little to facilitate their sharing behavior as reported by H. Ross & Lollis, 1989). Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated ways in which behavioristic accounts of the acquisition of prosocial and moral behaviors are inadequate, particularly because the role of judgment is disregarded (Hay, 1994; Turiel & Smetana, 1984).

In their extensive review of parental discipline methods in relation to the

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development of values, Grusec & Goodnow (1994) demonstrate how the model advocated by Wilson (parents controlling children through reinforcement) is fundamentally wrong; it is essential to understand the child's perception and interpretation of parental messages. The child's cognitive interpretation of the parental action, as appropriate, for example, influences the extent to which the child internalizes a given value. Research has revealed the different types of justifications children give when evaluating different types of transgressions (Grusec & Pederson, 1989; Smetana, 1985) and the way that the child's judgment of appropriateness influences the effectiveness of the parental message (Nucci, 1984; Killen, Breton, Ferguson, & Handler, 1994).

Grusec and Goodnow (1994) point out how parents vary their discipline practices as a function of the nature of the social or moral transgression and children must make sense of these various methods of discipline. For example, parents use a combination of power assertion and reasoning when responding to moral transgressions but use reasoning alone when responding to a failure to show concern for others (Grusec, Dix, & Mills, 1982). Further, research on family interactions has shown that when parents use Socratic styles of discourse children use more advanced levels of moral reasoning (Walker & Taylor, 1991). These findings lend support to our claim that children are not passively adopting parental values. The acquisition of morality is not accomplished by parental training; rather, it is based on a gradual developmental process in which children interpret, transform, and evaluate norms and values.

Because persons are active contributors to their own development – interpreting their world and making judgments that determine their actions in it – there is substantial change from infancy in their moral participation in everyday life. These developmental transformations have been most extensively studied in the domain of judgment, where a great deal has been learned about the ontogenesis of moral reasoning. This research has demonstrated that moral understanding is acquired through a process of reflection about social experiences and interaction. The individual constructs moral principles by participating in social interactions, encountering social problems with moral dimensions (e.g., sharing, harming others, turn taking), formulating solutions to these problems through the use of the child's current moral principle adapted for the situation through either symbolic social exchange (role taking) or genuine collaboration with others (co-construction), and finally observing the satisfactoriness of the solution once it is implemented. Change in moral reasoning occurs when an individual recognizes a shortcoming in his or her moral principle and gradually articulates a more adequate one. It is important to note that the process through

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which moral thought and behavior develop is quite general: All sorts of social interactions can provide the necessary ingredients for growth.

Moral integration and character

One of the most fundamental questions about morality is one that we know the least about: How are moral behavior and judgment related and integrated to form what is often referred to as moral character. This complex issue involves a number of interrelated questions: How is moral judgment related to moral behavior? How are moral principles applied in actual contexts? To what extent is moral functioning a product of the integration of different social and moral experiences? Numerous debates have arisen around these issues, sometimes collapsing and combining these various questions which, we believe, each call for separate in-depth analysis.

For example, Darley (1993), a social psychologist, in reviewing the recent *Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development* edited by Kurtines and Gewirtz (1991), claims that findings in cognitive psychology cast into doubt the possibility of broad principles of judgment:

Largely unnoticed by moral judgment researchers, modern cognitive psychology has developed an alternative to rule-based learning: instance-based learning, which Estes (1993) summarized as follows: "Rather than generating abstract . . . rules at an early stage of processing and retaining these for future use, the system simply retains a large array of information in a form that makes it accessible to computations when the test situation arises" (p. 144). The recognition of the implications of this modern cognitive view of reasoning is the most urgent agenda that researchers studying moral reasoning face. (1993, p. 354)

Darley's depiction of moral judgment, in which persons carry with them knowledge of many specific situations and the appropriate reactions for them, is consistent with the contextualist emphasis increasingly popular in psychology and philosophy (see Helwig, Chapter 5, this volume for critical consideration of this perspective). But it is not necessarily inconsistent with principled views of moral judgment (which, in Darley's terms, are dismissive of contextual considerations).

In our view there are at least three interrelated, but different, issues involved in Darley's claim: (1) the rejection of general, global structures that reflect moral principles, such as the ones proposed by Kohlberg; (2) the question of how principles, of any sort, are applied to actual contexts; and (3) the relationship between moral judgment and moral action. Regarding the first issue, there has been much work in the field that has empirically demonstrated domain-specific social and moral reasoning (Damon, 1977, 1983; Nucci, 1981; Smetana, 1985; Turiel, 1983; Youniss,

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1980). This work has already challenged the view that there are general, global structures applicable in all settings. The research has shown that individuals make distinct judgments about the self, society, and morality that reflect different domains of social knowledge. Just as research in cognitive areas has shifted toward domain-specific reasoning models (Feldman, 1980; Keil, 1986; Siegler, 1984), so, too, have researchers in the social and moral area.

This does not mean that moral principles do not govern social judgment. We believe that knowledge of a person's moral principles is often crucial for understanding that person's thought, emotions, and behavior. This point is made both by developmental psychologists (e.g., Colby & Damon, Chapter 11, this volume; Wainryb & Turiel, Chapter 9, this volume), social psychologists (L. Ross & Nisbett, 1991), and philosophers (Dworkin, 1993). For example, Dworkin argues convincingly that many of the apparently conflicting judgments made by individuals concerning abortion and euthanasia can be understood by reference to principles. For instance, Dworkin points to former U.S. President George Bush's claims that (1) abortion is murder, and (2) he would comfort and assuage his daughter if she decided to have an abortion. The two claims apparently are inconsistent because Bush would not suggest that he would comfort his daughter if she murdered her two-year-old. But Dworkin suggests that there is no inconsistency if one posits that the principle underlying the abortion debate is that a fetus is not truly a human (therefore abortion is not really murder), but as a precursor possesses some of the sacredness of human life and therefore must be treated with great respect (and therefore its destruction in abortion is regrettable). Inferring such a principle, Dworkin demonstrates, explains the ways in which superficially inconsistent judgments in fact are generated by the same underlying principle.

Although we believe that there are good reasons to infer that persons do form principles that guide their moral and social judgments, the chapters in this book make clear that the number of moral principles and their relation to each other is not yet known. Clearly, persons make principled distinctions among different sorts of issues; those which are genuinely moral, for instance, are understood in different ways than those which concern arbitrary social conventions. But how judgments from different principles are reconciled and synthesized has only recently been studied.

Second, how principles are applied to actual contexts has not been ignored by philosophical and psychological advocates of principled moral reasoning. Despite frequent mischaracterizations to the contrary, Kant – the exemplar of advocates for principled reasoning – emphasized the importance of context in making moral judgments (Dietrichson, 1964, p. 169)

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and recognized as well that persons commonly made correct intuitive moral judgments without resorting to reflective use of the categorical imperative (Kant, 1785/1959), p. 72). Kant believed that both context and habitual responding could be accommodated within his theory. Psychologists like Piaget and Kohlberg have claimed that habit and reflexive action could be reconciled with reflective judgment. Although the details vary among psychological theories, the various paradigms generally agree that habit and reflective judgment can be imagined as part of a single dialectical process: Actions are emitted, the actor reflects upon the action and its consequences, with this reflection leading to broad principles or rules, which in turn result in modification of future actions. Both habit and principle characterize psychological functioning from this perspective. The difficulty for research in both areas of cognitive and moral psychology is how to document this process and how to investigate it empirically. In both realms of psychology, this work is warranted and, yet, difficult to undertake.

The third issue, that of the relationship between moral judgment and action, taps into deep and significant aspects of morality (How do our judgments inform our actions and vice versa?), and again, this aspect of what we have termed *moral integration* is enigmatic. The relationship between moral judgment and moral behavior has often been interpreted in terms of the variability that people exhibit in their moral behaviors across contexts. As Darley (1993) asserts (as have others, e.g., Brown & Herrnstein, 1975):

There is an obvious and systematic tension between the developmental and social approaches; one emphasizes the inner determinants of morality, implying a consistency in an individual's behavior across situations, and the other finds the individual responsive to situational variation and therefore inconsistent in behavior. (p. 354)

While several generations of social psychological research have resulted in a long catalog of environmental factors that strongly influence the likelihood that persons will react prosocially in various experimental situations, other coexisting lines of social psychological research have interpreted contextual variation from cognitive viewpoints and have made links between individuals' attributions of situations and contextual variation (Asch, 1952/1987; Saltzstein, 1994; L. Ross & Nisbett, 1991). In his famous series of experiments, Milgram (1974) was able to show that the likelihood that a person would administer painful electrical shocks to an innocent other at the request of an authoritarian experimenter could be substantially altered by manipulating a number of factors, including the salience of the innocent other, the status of the authoritarian experimenter, and the social support the person received for refusing to provide the shock. Latane and Darley (1970) concluded that numerous factors influence the probability that a bystander will