

An Outline of Social-Cognitive Theory of Moral Character

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A social cognitive view of moral personality is proposed. The moral personality is understood in terms of the chronic accessibility of moral schemata for appraising the social landscape. Thus a moral or virtuous person, or a person who has a moral identity is one for whom moral categories are easily primed and activated for interpreting personal and social events. Chronic accessibility is a dimension of individual differences that is influenced by socialization. The developmental sources of schemata accessibility, and the implications of this approach for moral orientations, moral saints and the unity of the virtues, are discussed.

The purpose of this paper is to present an outline of a new approach for understanding moral character, using the experimental social cognitive literature as one point of departure. I will also attempt to provide a developmental grounding for moral character thus conceived, and to illustrate the resources this view has for resolving some of the more contentious issues that surround notions of moral character and character education.

The need for alternative accounts of moral character might not seem particularly obvious if one were to gauge the vitality of a construct by its visibility in the popular and academic literature. On this score the topics of virtue, character and character education are enjoying a remarkable resurgence over the past ten years. Indeed, there are scores of books that generally lament the decline of virtue (e.g., Bennett, 1992, 1995; Honig, 1987), lobby for certain kinds of character education in the schools (Benninga, 1991; Brooks & Goble, 1997; Kilpatrick, 1992; Lickona, 1991; Wynne & Ryan, 1993) or else serve as primers for teaching virtues in the home (Lickona, 1983; Unell & Wyckoff, 1995). In this genre the urgency for character education is typically motivated by perceptions of widespread youth disorder and moral erosion in contemporary culture. A dreary catalogue of social deviance and personal dysfunction, ranging from adolescent criminality and mental health disturbances, on the one hand, to disrespect for authority, bad language, and sexual precocity, on the other, is then presented as evidence of the characterological failings of adolescents, and of the lost moral compass of public education. Moreover the indiscretions of public officials, most notably the current President, have contributed to this unprecedented level of disclosure about the nature of moral character.

Yet despite the recent popularity of the virtues there appears to be no consensus about how virtues should be conceptualized as ethical or as psychological constructs. Traditionally virtues were thought of as stable bundles of personal qualities, tendencies, or traits that disposed one to live well the life that was good for one to live. To put it this

way is to make both a psychological and ethical claim. The psychological claim is bound up with the understanding of virtues as consisting of dispositional traits of character that produce various behavioral consistencies. The ethical claim is bound up with the notion of what it means to live well, and what a good life amounts to given one's role and status in a well-defined political structure (the *polis* of 'heroic societies', MacIntyre, 1984) or one's particular nature (Aristotle). From this perspective of classical antiquity (a world view commonly assumed by most writers in the modern virtue genre) one could well specify the schedule of virtues that was required in order to flourish in a society where the *telos* of human life was a settled matter, or where the range of possibilities for embodying virtues in social roles was narrow and well-defined. Yet, as critics have noted, it is not entirely clear that this classical view of virtues makes much sense in modern pluralist societies where consensus about the proper aims of the human person is up for grabs. The "life that is good for one to live" is hardly a settled matter in a liberal democratic state, and diverse options are permitted. In the absence of a common *telos* it is difficult to justify any particular set of virtues, or to resolve conflicts among them (Nash, 1997).

But my concern here is with the psychological status of virtue traits, and not with the ethical coherence of modern virtue-talk. Indeed, modern virtue theory takes many forms (e.g., French, Uehling & Wettstein, 1998), and ongoing ethical reflection on character and virtue will undoubtedly have important implications for moral psychology. But virtue theory will itself reciprocally profit from psychological analyses of moral personality. As Flanagan (1991, p. 35) puts it, "every moral conception owes us at least a partial specification of the personality and motivational structure it expects of morally mature individuals, and that the conception will need to be constrained by considerations of realism." But it is on this score that most contemporary accounts of moral character fail. Although the classical view of virtues is often invoked in the current virtue literature, there are grounds for doubting its usefulness as a

psychological construct or as a guide for moral education. In the next section I should like to trace some historical reasons why this classical understanding of virtue traits have been pushed to the margins of academic discourse. Then I will outline an alternative conception of moral personality that holds some promise for locating virtue traits within the context of innovative research programs in social cognition.

Two Sources of Discontent With Virtues

The current resurgence of interest in moral virtues simply underscores the fact that virtue-talk had largely been silenced (or taken the form of whispers) in academic psychology since at least the Hartshorne and May (1928-1932) studies some seven decades ago. The marginalization of moral character can be traced to two sources, one philosophical, the other psychological (Lapsley, 1996). The philosophical source is most evident in the Kantian metaethics that informs most contemporary psychological theories of moral cognitive development. According to this view reason lies at the center of our moral life. Emotions and passions are, in contrast, the source of temptation and error that must be surmounted by reason. That we are essentially dualistic in nature, and that there is a protracted conflict between the body and the mind-between the body and its emotional passions, on the one hand, and the mind, with its rationality, on the other, is a deeply entrenched theme in Western thought, and is part of our folk psychology (Johnson, 1993).

This folk psychology insists that of the two forces rationality is our aspiration. We are most fully human in the exercise of our rational faculties. Rationality is our higher nature. Passion, in contrast, is our lower nature. Passion is what is unworthy of us. Indeed, passions, our emotional capacities, and the body wherein they reside, are the source of moral backsliding. It corrupts our moral aspirations. It is the antimony of the sort of cool reflection that is required of the rational moral agent. Consequently this dichotomy presents us with the image of two forces slugging it out for control of the will of the moral agent-the force of reason, emanating from the mind, and the force of passion, emanating from the body. And it is just this image that is the source of some of our modern suspicions about moral character. If character is composed of traits assembled from biologically-grounded temperamental dispositions, or are adhesive to personality in some other way, then character and virtues seem like something *personological*. That is, character traits appear to be dispositions that are deeply rooted in our bodily nature, lying too close to the passions and too far from reason to be of much use to the rational moral agent.

There are also certain practical problems associated with trait language. It does seem that any compilation of favored virtues is an arbitrary and idiosyncratic exercise. MacIntyre (1984) noted, for example, that the Homeric virtues differed significantly from those favored by Aristotle, which, in turn, differed from Christian virtues. Of the 20 "teachable virtues" discussed by Unell and Wyckoff (1995),

only six are also listed on the Panel On Moral Education's schedule of 23 "core values" (Saterlie, 1988). Bennett's (1993) *Book of Virtues* is a best-selling compendium of moral stories illustrating 10 "cardinal virtues," but only three of these also show up on the Unell and Wyckoff (1995) schedule of virtues. The list of traits evaluated on my high school report card included none of Bennett's (1993) cardinal virtues, only one of the 23 "core values," and two of the "teachable virtues." Clearly, different authors tout very different schedules of virtues, so that deciding on which ones to select for "character education" is very much left to the whim, preference and ideological agenda of the one doing the selection. Kohlberg (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972) referred to this as the *bag of virtues* problem, and it is the inevitable result of the fact that in liberal polities there can be no settled consensus on a required set of virtues just because individuals in these societies legitimately seek diverse and multifarious ends.

A third problem is that the very meaning of trait labels is by no means fixed, and may well depend on local conventions. As Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) pointed out, one person's *integrity* is another person's *stubbornness*. One person's *honesty* in expressing one's feelings is another person's *insensitivity* to the feelings of others. Hence trait-talk does not provide what is most wanted in moral psychology, at least by Kohlberg's cognitive developmental approach, which is a way to cut through disagreement so as to secure moral consensus and conflict resolution, thereby warding off the specter of moral relativism.

But it is the *empirical* problem of traits that should give pause to friends of the virtues. If moral character requires one to be in possession of certain traits of virtue, then the psychological literature on personality traits is a compelling source of insights on how to understand them. But the results here are not encouraging. Nearly seven decades of empirical research has simply failed to support the classical ("pure traits") understanding of personality. The classical view held that personality traits are enduring dispositions that produce consistencies in our behavior across various contexts and situations. The classical view understands individuals to be bundles of stable traits that are adhesive to individuals, that are constitutional aspects of one's personality, and that dispose us to act in characteristic ways. But this classical notion of global traits has fallen on hard times (see Funder, 1991). There are no such thing as context-free traits. But this empirical fact poses problems for virtue theory just because it is difficult to talk about moral character, and virtue traits, when the very notion of *traits* is under such assault. If traits are not characteristically on display, then what does it mean to have character?

This broadside against the classical notion of global traits does not mean, of course, that there are no continuities in behavior. It does not mean, for that matter, that our behavior is held hostage to the vagaries of particular environments or settings, or that there is no such thing as personality. There are, in fact, important dispositional continuities in our behavior. It does indeed make sense to talk

about moral personality, and character, although we are first required to reconceptualize what it means to have dispositions, since the classical notion of global traits will not work. In other words, in order to talk meaningfully about moral character, we will need a defensible notion of personality, and a new set of person variables, one that has no recourse to global traits. Fortunately, there are a number of helpful suggestions in the literature.

A Social Cognitive View

According to Mischel (1990), personality is not something we *have*, that is, it is not a collection of adhesive global traits. Rather, personality is better conceived as something we *do* in particular settings, and part of what we do we do *cognitively*. And the social-cognitive literature has an assortment of constructs to help us conceptualize what we do cognitively, notions such as schemas, prototypes, scripts, personal constructs, competencies, and other knowledge structures. These cognitive constructs guide our perception of the moral landscape and influence our detection and appraisal of the moral characteristics of settings. Indeed, these constructs afford us an impressive discriminative facility in how we appraise the dilemmatic features of context (Mischel, 1990). Hence, what looks like situational specificity in our behavior, or inconsistency across settings, is not something that counts against the presumed cross-situational stability of "personality", but is rather evidence that our social information processing gives us the ability to perceptually discriminate the subtle, relevant features of different contexts, and to organize our behavior accordingly.

These social-cognitive constructs, then, are the new person variables that help bridge the folk psychology dualism between reason and personality. This dualism would no longer be relevant if personality traits were understood as certain kinds of social-cognitive knowledge structures. This strategy is close to what Blasi (1984, 1985) has been urging in recent years. Blasi argues that one way out of our folk psychology dualism that pits reason *against* personality is to show that, for some people at least, the self's very identity is constituted by moral categories. In his view there can be no dichotomy between the self and personality, on the one hand, and moral rationality, on the other, when self-understanding is constructed with reference to moral considerations. When this is the case one can speak meaningfully of a *moral personality*.

But note that, on this account, not everyone has a moral personality. Not everyone has a sense of self that is constructed with reference to moral categories. In Blasi's view, the self is a way of organizing self-relevant information. Some of us organize what is central, important and essential for our self-understanding around moral notions, others do not. Some let moral notions penetrate to the essence and core of what and who they are as a person, others define themselves with reference to other values. But one has a *moral identity*, or a *moral personality*, just to the extent that moral notions, such as being good, being just, being fair,

being compassionate, being forgiving, are judged to be central, important and essential to one's self-understanding.

Moral identity defined in this way preserves the notion of individual differences that lie at the heart of personality studies. Presumably, being just, being good, being fair, may not be part of the moral identities of some or most individuals. For some, moral categories do not penetrate their understanding of who they are as persons; do not influence their outlook on important issues; do not influence how they construe and evaluate situations. Perhaps some incorporate these categories into their self-understanding in differing degrees, or emphasize some but not other moral categories. Hence, for some, compassion is what is central, important and essential to their identity; others may resonate to fairness, still others to cooperation, or tolerance, or prudence, or some other virtue.

Blasi's vision of the moral personality is of singular importance. Moreover, it is amenable to integration with some current research programs in social-cognitive research, a move that has certain benefits, as we will see. One program of research developed by Higgins and his colleagues (Higgins, Rholes & Jones, 1977; Higgins, King & Mavin, 1982) concerns the implications of construct accessibility for social information processing. It is well known that the meaning and significance of events depend on how these things are represented. Social perception is deeply influenced by knowledge structures and the conditions of their activation. *Accessibility* refers to the readiness with which a cognitive construct or knowledge structure is utilized in memory. The more frequently a construct is activated, the more accessible it should be for processing social information. In addition, frequently activated constructs, over time, should be *chronically* accessible for purposes of social information-processing. And, since the social experience of individuals varies widely, it is likely that there should also be differences in the accessibility, indeed, even the availability, of cognitive constructs. That is, there should be individual differences in the readiness with which certain constructs are utilized, a finding that is commonly reported in the experimental literature.

In a number of experimental tests of this model Higgins and his colleagues manipulate the accessibility of certain cognitive constructs, and then show that subjects' impression of targets, their memory or their interpretation of social situations, and other aspects of social information-processing, varies accordingly. In one study (Higgins et al., 1982), subjects were asked to list their own trait characteristics and the traits of our friends. It was assumed that the first traits listed by subjects across the five lists would be ones that were chronically accessible. Two weeks later these subjects were invited back to ostensibly participate in a different experiment. Their new task was to read an essay about a target student, and to form an impression of the student. Each essay was individually tailored to include descriptors traits that were accessible or inaccessible for each particular subject. The results showed that impression

Higgins, 1988). Procedural self-other contingency knowledge leads to the formation of self-guides and the strength of this knowledge is defined in terms of accessibility. Second, children are motivated to evaluate the self in accordance with self-guides in order to monitor their progress in self-regulation (Higgins, 1989). One is ordinarily motivated to bring one's actual self in conformity with self-guides, that is, one is motivated to reduce the discrepancy between the actual and ideal or ought self. This is perhaps one way of understanding Blasi's account of moral identity, where the self is defined in terms of moral categories. In social-cognitive terms what this means is that there is a significant overlap in the attributes accorded to the actual and the ought self. In this way we invest ourselves, or identify ourselves, with what we care about morally (Frankfurt, 1982).

In early moral socialization, then, one must hold out ideal and ought standards to the child, and help the child reduce the discrepancy between the actual self and self-guides, and to feel the requisite moral emotions when there is discrepancy. How can this be done? In a sense much of the effective moral educational practices of parents that leads to the formation of self-guides is *also* procedural knowledge, and is otherwise indistinguishable from effective *parenting*. In other words, the infant develops procedures for self-regulation-develops self-other contingency knowledge-"through the caregiver's regulatory role in structuring the continuity of early experience" (Emde et al., 1991, p. 259). But self-regulation only makes possible the formation of self-guides. What is also required is for children to come to see that the moral attributes of the "ought self" are those things that are central, essential and important for one's actual self-concept. Moreover, if a moral personality is one where moral constructs are chronically-accessible for self-evaluation and social information-processing, then moral socialization must manipulate or prime the chronicity of moral categories.

Two research programs provide helpful clues about how this might occur in development. In one line of research Grusec and her colleagues (Grusec, Kuczynski, Simutis & Rushton, 1978); Grusec & Redler, 1980) have shown that children who are given "character attributions" when they perform a prosocial act ("*Gee you shared. I guess you're the sort of person who likes to help others whenever you can. Yes, you are a nice and helpful person*") are more likely to engage in future prosocial behavior than are children whose prosocial behavior is simply praised ("*Gee you shared. It was good that you gave some of your marbles to those poor children. Yes, that was a nice and helpful thing to do*"). The difference in these examples (from Grusec & Redler, 1980) is between being a *nice person* versus doing a *nice thing*. Children who are told that they are a good person will tend to be prosocial than children who are simply praised for engaging in good behavior. In Grusec's view, when we make attributions about a child's character, we influence the child's emerging self-concept, and children are more likely to behave in ways that confirm their self-

understanding. In terms of the present model, however, one might also suggest that children who are the object of many prosocial and moral character attributions would be more likely to have moral categories chronically accessible for social information-processing, more likely to define the actual self ("*you are a nice and helpful person*") in terms of the ought self ("*it was good that you shared*"), or, alternatively, more likely to have moral categories define what is essential, important and central to their self-understanding-in short- more likely to have a moral personality.

A second area of research that holds clues for early character development is the memory development literature, although its insights have rarely been exploited for this purpose. There are three general findings that are of interest. First, research shows that memory development is greatly influenced by numerous non-strategic factors. For example, children often, and easily, acquire information without intention, and retrieve information without awareness (Schneider & Bjorklund, 1998). These unintentional and implicit memory systems, according to Schneider and Bjorklund (1998, p. 492), "would seem to be of critical importance in situations in which cultural learning occurs through observations of adults and involvement in daily activities," although intentional and explicit memory systems are also required to master very complex tasks. Second, even young children temporally organize even sequences (Fivush, Kuebli & Clubb, 1992), often after a single exposure. Moreover, temporal even sequences appear to be organized by young children into scripted knowledge structures, which subsequently guide recall (Bauer & Fivush, 1992; Farrar & Goodman, 1992). Indeed, some authors suggest that scripts "yield an *automatic* organizational structure for children's recall of stories and real-world events" (Schneider & Bjorklund, 1998, p. 498, my emphasis). Third, even memories organized around the self (or "autobiographical memories") tend to be *socially constructed* in collaboration with parents who instruct children how to construct and organize personal narratives (Schneider and Bjorklund, 1998). This is done through interrogatories that parents direct towards children concerning recently experienced events ("Where did we go? What did we see? Who was there? What happened next?"). As Schneider and Bjorklund (1998) point out, these questions help children learn what aspects of their experience are important, how to sequence them in an appropriate temporal or causal order, and how to construct narratives more generally.

How might these three sets of findings inform early character development? They first underscore the point that much of moral socialization need not be explicit, intentional or programmatic. Naturally-occurring events in the daily context of the environment provide numerous opportunities for unintentional and implicit learning of morally relevant event sequences. Some of these event sequences will be constructed into scripts about how events might unfold, for example, if I push my brother, then he cries; when my brother cries then I apologize. Or, when I am shown a kindness, then I express gratitude. Or, if I bully my sister

then I can take her candy. The intervention of parents then assists children solidify even representations into autobiographical memories by explicit coaching. Parental interrogatories ("What happened when you hit your sister? Why did she cry? What should you do next?") assists children organize events into personally relevant autobiographical narratives. These interrogatories might include character attributions as well, so that the ideal and the ought self are part of one's autobiographical story. In this way adults help identify morally relevant aspects of the child's experience, and encourage the formation of self-narratives that easily primed, easily activated, and chronically accessible for (perhaps) *automatic* social information-processing.

Virtues of the Model

I should like to briefly note a number of advantages that a social-cognitive approach to moral personality might enjoy.

Moral Orientations. The present model may provide a new perspective on the origin of moral orientations. Whether a person resonates to justice, or to benevolence or caring, may be driven by the sort of self-guides that are held out as possibilities during the course of gender role socialization. Moral orientations will take gender differentiated forms if character attributions are differentiated along gender lines. But I hasten to add that numerous other virtues can also be the target of character attributions.

Moral Saints. Colby and Damon (1994) have shown that most moral exemplars do not see their extraordinary commitments as one deriving from an agonizing decision-making calculus. They just seem to know what the right and proper thing is to do, as it were, automatically, without protracted deliberation. Moreover, most moral saints do not score at high levels of moral reasoning. I suspect that the automaticity of moral response that is characteristic of moral saints derives from the fact that for these individuals moral categories are chronically accessible. Furthermore, there is probably significant overlap among the three self-state representations.

Procedural and Declarative Knowledge. This distinction clarifies the on-going debate between proponents of "character" and virtues, on the one hand, and cognitive developmentalism, on the other. Historically the debate is one between two visions of the moral life, one attributed to Aristotle, the other to Kant. The dichotomy is too stark and cannot be defended, for Aristotle ethics requires reasoned judgment, and for Kant ethics require virtue. But in the present context the terms of the debate have become code words for other kinds of ideological commitments, and the conversation across camps has often been reduced to invective and caricature (for an exception, see Nash, 1997). "Character education" has become a code word that stands for the sort of mindless habit-training that encourages docile conformity, and is otherwise conducive to the training of fascists – at least that is the caricature from the perspective of cognitive developmentalism. "Moral autonomy" and "democratic education" and "moral reasoning" have be-

come code words that stand for "anything goes" and "letting the kids decide", and is otherwise compatible with the sort of moral degeneracy that only liberal anarchists could love – at least that is the caricature from the perspective of the trait-and-virtue camp. The debate between the camps has an unfortunate "Either/Or" sense of urgency, at least among the ideologues.

However, the present model suggests that moral functioning has both a procedural and declarative aspect. Effective habits, self-regulation, moral perception, conscience development, and other traditional components of "character" constitute the *procedural* aspect of moral functioning. Here behavior is governed by implicit rule systems that one is ordinarily unable to articulate. There is a certain automaticity to intellectual and social behavior that is more likely to be resisted in the moral development literature than in the social-cognitive literature. Yet, much of our moral performance takes place without explicit awareness. It is a product of our "character," of what we see in the social landscape. Procedural knowledge is *knowing how*, and is the proper subject of what has been called character education. But being conscious of moral rule systems, being able to articulate and reason about them, this is the *declarative* aspect of moral functioning. Declarative moral knowledge is *knowing why*, and it is the proper subject of the cognitive developmental approach. Part of this declarative knowledge is surely meta-cognitive in nature, involving executive processes that select, control and monitor the application of moral knowledge structures (Kuhn, 1992).

Unity of the Virtues. The Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions insist that the various virtues must cohere in unified practice. To be in possession of any particular virtue requires the possession of all the others. The proper exercise of courage, for example, requires the virtue of prudence. The echo of this view is often heard in popular discourse about the characterological requirements for holding public office. It is heard, for example, in the oft-repeated claim in current political discourse that "character matters" in public life. This assertion implies that public and private virtues must hang together in concert for the proper conduct of elected office. After all, if a president is unfaithful to his marriage vows, can he be trusted to keep faith with his political commitments? If a person's private sexual conduct is disreputable, can he or she be counted on to show political *courage*? Or to seek social *justice*? Or be *cooperative* with political opponents? Of course, the unity of the virtues requirement applies just as much to ordinary private citizens as it does to publicly elected officials, although it is a requirement more safely demanded of others than ourselves.

It is doubtful, however, that a strong version of this thesis can be defended (MacIntyre, 1984). Indeed, on strictly psychological grounds, it may even be the case that *not all good qualities are necessarily compatible* (White, 1973). It is unlikely that all good qualities are equally adaptive for the choices one has to make in life. As a result certain characterological blindspots might be the price one pays for

cultivating excellences in other domains of one's life. And I suspect that the slogan "character matters" makes more of a political than a psychological or ethical claim. In terms of the present model the unity of virtues view would require that all trait knowledge structures be equally accessible, but this requirement is psychologically implausible. Indeed, this model provides an account of what virtue theories, either ethical or psychological, are rarely called upon to explain, which is the possibility of moral blindspots or instances of characterological failure. Moral personality is a dimension of individual differences characterized by the differential accessibility, or chronicity, of trait knowledge structures, not all of which need be moral trait schemes.

Conclusion

It should be clear to the reader that the present account of moral personality is, in fact, a modest outline of what a social-cognitive theory might look like. Indeed, I can anticipate at least two sources of dissatisfaction with it. One reservation is that social-cognitive accounts, such as this one, seems absent any satisfactory notion of intentional subjectivity, moral agency, or the phenomenological aspects of selfhood. The present model trades too heavily on the input-output calculus of information-processing, and therefore misses the agentic and intentional aspects of the moral self. A second reservation is that the appeal to schemas, competencies, prototypes, and similar constructs to describe the new person variables in moral personality research is to trade the ordinary, layperson understanding of "traits" for constructs that are unnecessarily *narrow* and *esoteric* (Funder, 1991). Indeed, Funder (1991) has developed a compelling "neo-Allportian" conceptualization of global traits that begins with an understanding of traits as they are understood in everyday social discourse, and includes an account of developmental, functional and contextual mechanisms for their behavioral expression.

I would not want to gainsay these and other reservations concerning the present theoretical outline. After all, as Lakatos (1989a, p. 5) once put it, "all theories are born refuted and die refuted". Yet I believe this outline points the way for meaningful integration of moral psychology with the rich empirical content, research tactics and theoretical frameworks of social-cognitive science, information-processing and intellectual development. In this sense, through these integrations, it attempts to anticipate novel facts about moral personological and moral cognitive functioning. Moreover, it also attempts an explanation of some traditional areas of concern in moral psychology, such as the existence of moral orientations, the unity of virtues, and moral saints. A research program that claims to explain the empirical content of rivals, and also anticipates novel facts, is judged to be *progressive*, according to Lakatos (1978b), a virtue that I claim for the present theoretical outline.

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