

# Moral Development at the Crossroads: New Trends and Possible Futures

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This article introduces a special section on moral development. We claim that the field is now undergoing a resurgence of theoretical and methodological innovation after the eclipse of paradigmatic moral stage theory. Although research on prosocial development, moral emotions, and social domain theory has sustained interest in moral development, recent additional trends have contributed to its resurgence. This includes research in neuroscience, sociobiology, and social psychology; broad interest in moral-character education and virtues; and the appearance of recent handbooks and special journal issues. We review 3 broad possible future themes (early development, self and personality, and culture) of moral development research and introduce a set of new contributions in this special section as examples.

*Keywords:* moral development, moral identity, prosocial behaviors, antisocial behaviors, culture

The study of moral development is enjoying a resurgence of theoretical and methodological innovation that has not been seen in some time. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, the topic was dominated by stage theories in the cognitive developmental tradition, the most important of which was Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Indeed, for a time, Kohlberg's research program was the leading edge of developmental science as it wrested the study of socialization from behavioral social learning theory and confronted crucial questions concerning the structure of reasoning, the nature and sequence of developmental change, and how to assess it. Two of Kohlberg's greatest works, *Stage and Sequence* (1969) and *From Is to Ought* (1971), were required reading for every developmental psychologist who came of age during those years. Moreover, moral stage theory spawned productive lines of research that coalesced into a discernible field of social cognitive development that galvanized a generation of researchers to investigate such topics as distributive justice, social conventional and prosocial reasoning, perspective taking, interpersonal understanding, and self-development (e.g., Damon, 1977; Damon & Hart, 1982; Eisenberg, 1986; Selman, 1980; Turiel, 1983), among other topics. The search was on for structures and stages.

Yet over time, the concerns of social cognitive development in general, and of Kohlberg's theory in particular, lost its urgency, and for several reasons. One reason was the general decline of Piaget's (1965) influence within developmental science. As alter-

native models of intellectual development gained currency, there was less interest in using Piagetian stage and structures as explanatory mechanisms. Insofar as moral stage theory traded on the prestige and authority of the Piagetian paradigm, the case for stage models in the moral domain seemed less compelling the more that developmental science moved away from Piaget's theory. Moreover, the study of moral development did not profit from the wave of post-Piagetian theoretical and methodological innovations that swept developmental psychology. While the study of cognition changed dramatically, the study of moral cognition was still predominantly a matter of cognitive structures developing through stages (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2005).

There were also significant empirical challenges, indeed, *prima facie* refutation, of crucial hardcore theoretical claims of moral stages. The insistence that stages be defined as structured wholes, for example, or that developmental sequence be invariant proved difficult to sustain empirically. The Kohlberg team was inventive in response to these challenges, and its empirical successes and influence on educational and applied practices cannot be overlooked (Gibbs, 2013; Rest, 1986). But these revisions also reduced the scope of moral inquiry to a narrow slice of the moral domain (e.g., spontaneous production of moral judgments about hard-case dilemmas concerning fairness) that necessarily put out of bounds or marginalized other features of moral life (e.g., moral emotions, character, prosociality) or of moral formation in early childhood (Lapsley, 2006). There was little specification of how the development of moral reasoning aligned with other features of the developing person, such as temperament, self-regulation, self-identity, or personality.

Of course, a research program can only be expected to explain the territory it stakes out for itself. Yet progressive programs must not only resolve anomaly but also anticipate novel facts (Lakatos, Worrall, & Currie, 1978). Whereas struggling programs might normally look to allied literatures for theoretical innovation and for possible lines of integration and growth, this option was not easily available to moral stage theory, given its antipathy to theoretical approaches that might weaken the case against ethical relativism or unduly emphasize noncognitive mechanisms. Although there was

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some movement toward a self-model of moral behavior (Blasi, 1983), for example, there was otherwise little interest in examining the moral development of character, virtue, and personality, even though these topics are prominent in the concerns of ethicists, parents, educators, and policy makers alike.

So for a time, it seemed that moral development was at a crossroad (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2005). Yet how one evaluates the status of a field depends on where one looks. Even while moral-stage scholars continued to investigate the limits of structures and stages, scholars from other research programs opened up important lines of investigation in moral development. For example, although the distinction between social conventions and morality had its origin in cognitive developmental theory and grew out of certain dissatisfactions with Kohlberg's theory, it emerged over the years as a dominant perspective on the domains of social knowledge and the boundaries that even young children draw around them (Smetana, 1995; Turiel, 1983). The progressive character of this research program is indicated by its extension to include a personal domain of judgment (Nucci, 2008) and to an explication of how domains of social judgments work in the context of parental authority (Smetana, 1995), peer exclusion (Horn, 2003; Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin, & Stangor, 2002), disagreement (Wainryb, Shaw, Laupa & Smith, 2001), and culture (Turiel, 2002; Wainryb, 2006).

In addition, research on moral emotions, particularly empathy, sympathy, guilt and shame, continued apace, as did research on prosocial behavior and development (Eisenberg, 1986; Hoffman, 2000; Lagattuta, 2005). Much of this work attempted to provide an understanding of moral emotions in a comprehensive way that integrated biological perspectives on genetics and temperament with contexts of socialization, including parents, peers, and culture (Carlo & Randall, 2001). Rather than treat moral emotions as one aspect that is independent of other aspects (e.g., moral cognitions, behaviors), it is the interplay of these various processes that command the attention of much of this research (Carlo, 2006; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006).

The emergence of the moral self of infancy is one example of the complex interplay of early biological tendencies and contexts of socialization. In what is surely an unheralded classic article, Emde, Biringen, Clyman, and Oppenheim (1991) argued that the moral self has its developmental source in biologically prepared motives with which infants are born. These include the inborn propensity for exploration, mastery, and self-regulation; the tendency to initiate, sustain, and terminate behavioral synchrony and regulate caregiver behavior by emotional communicative sharing; and the tendency to seek out the novel to make it familiar. These biologically driven propensities form an affective core that is progressively elaborated within the context of sensitive, responsive parenting to yield morally significant infant procedural knowledge about reciprocity, norm violations, and empathy sharing. Although this model of infant moral learning did not get much traction at the time, it now seems prescient of the contemporary interest in the early foundations of altruism, sociomoral personality, and the development of conscience (e.g., Kochanska, 1997; Thompson, 1998, 2009; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009).

Three additional trends have contributed to the renewed vitality of morality research. One is that moral functioning is increasingly the target of research in neuroscience, sociobiology, and social and personality psychology. A robust neuroscience of moral cognition,

emotion, and behavior has expanded the field of play in moral psychology (Greene, 2005; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley & Cohen, 2001; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008b). There is increasing interest in the neurobiology of empathy and social behavior, (Carter & Porges, 2013; Nelson, 2013) and the bio-evolutionary basis of morality (Brosnan, 2011; Joyce, 2006; Krebs, 2011; Levy, 2004; Lieberman, Tooby & Cosmides, 2003; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008a). Indeed, fundamental questions regarding the evolutionary roots and functioning of morality, aggression, and altruism continue to be the subject of research and debate (Boehm, 2012; de Waal, 1997; Hauser, 2006), although the implication of this work for development is far less clear.

Among social psychologists, the possibility is raised that moral behavior is driven by innately prepared and affect-laden intuitions and that moral reasoning is post hoc rationalization (Haidt, 2001; Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Haidt & Kasebir, 2010). The apparent "new synthesis" in moral psychology that emerges from social psychology, neuroscience, and evolutionary psychology is that affect is primary, judgments are automatic, and morality plays a "binding and building" social function and involves much more than harm and fairness (Haidt, 2007). These perspectives have generated a useful and constructive reconsideration of the very terms of reference for the phenomenon under study (Gibbs, 2013; Haidt, 2001, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Lapsley & Hill, 2008; Narvaez, 2010; Pizarro & Bloom, 2003). However, the strong grounding in nativism and focused research on adults gives little credence to developmental mechanisms and lacks details on how intuitive processes become differentiated across individuals, contexts, and time. It is not surprising that morality has engaged researchers across the spectrum of disciplines given its centrality to what it means to be a person. It is also not surprising that this work has engaged developmental science insofar as psychological explanation is not complete without specification of the developmental trajectories that yield adult moral functioning as an outcome.

The second influence is the persistence of virtue and character as explicit goals of education. Moral development always has entailed several implications for educational practice where the goal was to advance stage-related deliberative competence or the formation of just communities (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Indeed, there was much sympathy for the "Berkowitz rule" that any adequate moral development theory must have consequences for moral formation (Lapsley & Hill, 2008). But what moral-stage theorists did not particularly value was the language of traits of character as the target of education. This approach was derided for the arbitrary sampling that it encouraged from a "bag-of-virtues" and for the possibility that the meaning of virtue trait words is relative to particular communities. After all, what looks like *integrity* from one vantage point could look like *stubbornness* from another. Honesty in expressing one's feelings might also look like insensitivity to the feelings of others (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972). If character refers to the moral qualities of personality, then its explication for purposes of character education will require an account that is compatible with the best insights about psychological functioning and with well-attested models of personality. Such models will require an account of character that includes developmental specification (Lapsley & Yeager, 2013; Sokol, Hammond, & Berkowitz, 2010)—and one that articulates the complex, multidimensional elements of moral character.

The growing interest in character and virtues aligns with the resurgence of research on moral identity and moral (or care) exemplars (Blasi, 1983; Colby & Damon, 1992; Hart & Fegley, 1995; Oliner & Oliner, 1988; see Hardy & Carlo, 2005). Scholars have begun to identify the constellation of character traits that reflect strong and committed actions by individuals that push the boundaries of morality. Interest in research on moral identity initially stemmed from a desire to bridge the gap between moral understanding and moral action and to draw attention to the role of moral motivation. Consequently, researchers adopted different methodologies (e.g., personality instruments, interviews with nominated exemplars) to conduct research on adults (e.g., Matsuba & Walker, 2004) and adolescents (e.g., Laible, Eye, & Carlo, 2008) with a common interest in simultaneously accounting for multiple dimensions (e.g., cognitions, emotions, actions) of the moral self. If moral-stage theory was the driver of moral education in the past, character education will increasingly motivate research on moral identity development in the future.

Finally, a third influence on the resurgence of interest in moral development has been the appearance of new handbooks and special journal issues that has had the effect of revealing the field unto itself. The *Handbook of Moral Development* (Killen & Smetana, 2006) and *Handbook of Moral and Character Education* (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008) have done much to summarize the rich diversity of research efforts in the last decade. These handbooks follow in the footsteps of special issue efforts (Brugman, Keller, & Sokol, 2013; Hart & Carlo, 2005; Reed & Spoermer, 2008) to spur greater interest in moral development and to reinsert such research into the forefront of developmental scholarship.

### The New Crossroad

It is now clear that the study of moral functioning has been sparked a renaissance of interest across a much broader spectrum of theoretical and empirical traditions and across a spectrum of psychological disciplines, including the various neurosciences. It is now possible to talk about a new generation of moral development research that folds into its domain topics of long interest to developmental science, even though these have not been traditionally conceptualized as moral development constructs. These include topics such as internal working models, event representations, theory of mind, autobiographical memory, self-regulation, temperament and emotions, and self and personality development among others. How these constructs are recruited for moral functioning is a pressing empirical question.

Perhaps more important are questions regarding the relevance of moral development scholarship for addressing the pressing social issues of our times. Violence, genocide, and war; concerns about environmental degradation; poverty and famine; and the persistence of racism and discrimination increase the demand for relevant social science research. But it is also a pressing social issue to understand better the developmental conditions for flourishing and for what it means to live well the life that is good for one to live. The need has never been greater to reach beyond the current boundaries of moral developmental scholarship to adequately address such issues, and these efforts will require broad, integrative, and multidisciplinary theoretical and methodological approaches. Our response to these social issues requires greater attention if our research is to be considered relevant and useful.

We would like to outline in broad stroke major themes that will confront this new generation of research and point out some intriguing landmarks at the new crossroad of moral development.

### Early Development

It would not be entirely accurate to say that the next frontier of moral development research will involve the years 0 to 3, given how frequently this terrain has been traversed in recent years, although its importance for understanding a wide array of moral competencies will come into sharper relief in the years ahead. Research has shown that many prosocial behaviors are well on display by the second year (Brownell, 2013). By the second birthday, children share toys and give things away. Young children cooperate and help others reach their goals, have an understanding of others' needs and intentions, and will comfort a younger sibling or attempt to alleviate distress by offers of sympathy or help (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Warneken & Tomasello, 2007). Around age 3, toddlers can distinguish moral and conventional norm violations using several criteria (Smetana & Braeges, 1990) and come to the defense of moral norms (Vaish, Missana & Tomasello, 2011).

Further exploration of the moral capacities of infants and toddlers will continue to be a prominent feature of the next generation of moral development research. Some of this research is already showing astonishing protomoral capacities in quite early life, leading to speculation about the existence of an innate moral core (Hamlin, 2013) or natural propensity for altruism (Warneken & Tomasello, 2009). Of course, moral development has a long way to go and must build upon these natural propensities that infants bring with them. The challenge for moral development is to identify the crucial ontogenetic and contextual variables that recruit these tendencies for sustained moral functioning in later childhood and beyond (Thompson, 2009). Of increasing importance will be the biological turn that is now so prominent in other domains of developmental research. For example, investigations into the neurobiological bases of social behavior and of empathy and its dynamic interplay with varieties of caregiving and early experience will have strong implications for understanding the epigenetics of moral development (Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore, & Gleason, 2013).

Kochanska's (1997, 2002) research illustrates the complex interplay of infant temperament and qualities of early caregiving that carves out distinctive pathways to conscience. Kochanska and Kim extend this work in important ways in the special section. In two longitudinal studies, these authors document a developmental chain that links infant mutual responsive orientation to effortful control and later internalization of behavioral standards. But there is evidence of moderated mediation in these trends. The influence of temperament (effortful control) on rule-compatible conduct is less prominent in families characterized by an early history of positive relations. Put differently, the influence of temperament is more potent when early caregiver relationships are suboptimal and less positive.

Although much of the attention to moral understanding has traditionally focused on older children, adolescents, and young adults, there is growing attention to young children's understanding of moral events. These models present accumulating evidence on the capacities of young children to attend to the psychological

and motivational attributes of others (including theory of mind) and the multiple characteristics of their social environments. Based on the social domain perspective and using an experimental design, Jambon and Smetana report on age differences in moral evaluations of well-intended harm and selfish harm scenarios among young and middle-age children. Their findings generally suggest that both young and middle-age children distinguish between necessary and selfish harm but that older children demonstrated more forgiveness of necessary harm, referred less to protagonists' negative actions in the necessary harm condition, increasingly appealed to the positive intent and action (but only when psychological, rather than physical, harm is done), and exhibited better coordination of competing concerns. Overall, the findings extend prior research on theory of mind and perspective taking and moral reasoning (cf. work on prosocial moral reasoning; Eisenberg, 1986) that young children are capable of making some relatively simple distinctions of intentions and consequences (psychological vs. physical) for others and make judgments about the personal attributes of protagonists. However, children clearly show increasingly sophisticated moral understanding abilities across young and middle childhood. Importantly, these increases in moral understanding are directly linked to children's increasing sociocognitive capacities, including their ability to simultaneously consider the personal and situational attributes of moral events. Bridging the links among early cognitive and emotional capacities, temperamental characteristics, and socialization influences continues to be of primary importance for developing more comprehensive theories of moral development.

### Self and Personality

That moral rationality attaches to selves with personality would seem a commonplace except that developmental research on the moral personality is only now getting untracked. How do dimensions of individual differences coalesce into a moral character? One promising line of research concerns early sociopersonality development and the emergence of conscience and the moral self (Thompson, 2009). One study showed, for example, that the moral self was a mediator of the relationship between early "out-of-sight" compliance with maternal rules at 25–52 months and later competent adaptation at 80 months (Kochanska, Koenig, Barry, Kim & Yoon, 2010). One theory traces the developmental origins of moral personality to the way parents scaffold morally significant event representations in dialogic encounters with children in early life and how these are turned into autobiographical narratives that structure the definition of the self (Lapsley & Hill, 2009).

Similarly, in research reported in this special section, Recchia, Wainryb, Bourne and Pasupathi show how mother–child conversation about prosocial and harming behavior can facilitate a child's developing sense of moral agency. Moral agency is one of the most important new constructs to emerge in the study of moral development. Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010) described moral agency as the experience of intentional moral failure, of visiting harm on another, for example, with full knowledge that it was wrong to do so. When confronted with moral failure, we construct narratives to help make sense of our moral agency and the sort of person we claim ourselves to be. In the present study, Recchia and colleagues show how features of maternal conversation can structure chil-

dren's sense of themselves as prosocial moral agents, even when confronted with moral failure.

Of course, moral self-development is a lifelong concern with particular resonance in adolescence and emerging adulthood where it is interwoven with identity development (Hart & Carlo, 2005, 2011). Although interest in moral self-identity is surging (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009), it is also proving a challenge to measure the construct and to map its developmental course. These are not unrelated problems. In the special section, Hardy, Walker, Olsen, Woodbury, and Hickman provide new theoretical and methodological options. On the theoretical front, moral identity is aligned with the literature on possible selves. On this account, one dimension of moral identity concerns the extent to which morality is folded into one's ideal self. The appeal to possible selves to flesh out the conceptualization of moral identity illustrates the usefulness of integrative perspectives in framing moral development theory. On the methodological front, a new measure of *moral ideal self* is proposed. Across two data sets, the results show that the moral ideal self predicts a variety of morally relevant adolescent outcomes, possibly because of its motivational properties. We are more likely to engage in moral action, on this account, when our ideal self includes a commitment to morality.

From a different theoretical and methodological approach, Eisenberg and her colleagues demonstrate some of the strongest evidence on the enduring qualities of prosociality across time. Based on her pioneering longitudinal study of prosocial tendencies, these researchers demonstrate relatively stable, individual differences in prosocial moral reasoning, sympathy, perspective taking, and prosocial and aggressive behaviors from preschool to 31–32 years of age. While these findings provide evidence of relatively stable patterns of prosocial functioning across time, the findings also show age-related changes in the complexities and expression of prosocial moral reasoning. Evidence for nonlinear changes in specific forms of prosocial moral reasoning suggest ebb and flow that may be sensitive to changing social demands and cognitive maturity across time. Such findings support assertions that prosocial moral reasoning does not continually increase and that there may be apparent regressions in such reasoning. These changes in prosocial cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, and their longitudinal relations across time, suggest an intertwined constellation of prosocial tendencies. Although Eisenberg and associates do not explicitly endorse a notion of a moral self or care-based identity, they do suggest that there are individuals who develop a prosocial orientation that is relatively enduring across the life span.

At the other end of the behavioral spectrum, Caprara and his colleagues present their scholarly work designed to understand aggressive and violent behaviors in Italian young adults. Their longitudinal study provides insights on traits associated with such behaviors. They focus on a set of individual difference characteristics that facilitate immoral behaviors, namely, irritability (i.e., toleration of frustration), hostile rumination (i.e., resentment and tendencies of ill will toward others), and moral disengagement (i.e., disconnectedness of moral sanctions, which facilitates harm toward others). Although these traits have been identified as correlates of antisocial behaviors in prior research, the research team demonstrates a pattern of relatively stable, reciprocal relations across four waves of data. In general, moral disengagement plays a central role in mediating the ongoing influence of irritability and hostile rumination on antisocial behaviors. Moreover, the findings

provide relatively more support for a forward-cascading influence, rather than a reverse-causal influence (i.e., antisocial behaviors influence antisocial traits). Their findings point to the enduring qualities of the early presence of antisocial traits on later antisocial behaviors. How such traits can be integrated into existing models of moral development and understanding will undoubtedly present a challenge for future researchers.

### Culture and Context

Although research on cultural and contextual aspects of moral development has been of interest in the past, the emerging trend of research in this area has a new face. Whereas in the past, much of the focus of such research was on the question of whether moral reasoning is universal across cultures, new lines of inquiry focus on the culture-specific mechanisms that predict moral functioning in different societies and ethnic/racial groups. Much of this research is guided by cultural developmental theorists (e.g., Super & Harkness, 1997; Whiting & Edwards, 1988) who emphasize the unique rituals, environments, customs, belief systems, and practices that shape and mold moral development in children from different societal niches. For example, research on prosocial behaviors among U.S. Latino/a youth demonstrates the central role of parental values and practices related to familism (i.e., value of the ties and identity with the family unit) as relevant predictor of such behaviors in these youth (Knight & Carlo, 2012). Other research shows how individual differences in types of prosocial behaviors exhibited by Kenyan children are accounted for by the social companions and parental chore assignments (de Guzman, Edwards, & Carlo, 2005). These research endeavors move us toward understanding the intrapersonal (e.g., cultural values) and social contextual (e.g., social companions) features of cultural groups that are relevant to moral functioning.

Building on those previous efforts to understand the culture-related processes linked to moral functioning, Brenick and Killen present findings that point directly to the role of cultural identity and intergroup contact in moral judgments. Based on a social reasoning developmental perspective, these investigators utilize the topic of peer social exclusion as a means of understanding Jewish–Arab relations within the United States. Their findings were complex and showed fairly sophisticated reasoning and understanding among a sample of U.S. Jewish and Arab youth. In general, youth rejected exclusion of outgroup members based on concerns for fairness. However, such exclusion seemed relatively more acceptable in home or community contexts rather than in peer contexts. These latter findings suggest that youth are exposed to mixed messages regarding the acceptability of outgroup members, which may lead to variability in the application of social exclusion rules across situations. On the other hand, and perhaps most revealing, they reported that youth who had more intergroup contact were less susceptible to condone social exclusion of outgroup members across all contexts. Finally, youth who reported strong identity commitment and concern for relationships were least susceptible to excluding others based on outgroup status. Taken together, the study moves research on culture-related (intrapersonal and interpersonal) moral processes using rigorous experimental designs and applies this approach to a timely and important topic with high social relevance—that is, understanding culture-group based social exclusion.

### Conclusions

The special section presents a sample of exemplary research that significantly advances our understanding of moral development at a time of innovative theories, methodologies, and research endeavors. Given space considerations, the range of presented empirical research is necessarily limited in scope but captures several major current themes and developments in the study of moral development. The studies represent a diverse range of attempts to move the field beyond traditional discourse on the descriptive nature of morality toward explanatory research efforts that advance the processes that account for developmental change in morality. The works exemplify temperament and trait perspectives, socialization models, cognitive–developmental approaches, and culturally linked mechanisms that extend and expand upon our basic understanding of moral cognitions, emotions, and behaviors. Of course, these advances come with added complexities and challenges that require more co-constructive discourse across the various moral-relevant subfields of study—and this special section is one effort toward that goal.

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