

Moral Agency, Identity and Narrative in Moral Development

Commentary on Pasupathi and Wainryb

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Moral agency · Moral development · Moral self-identity

... the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.
Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains.
T.S. Eliot (Little Gidding)

Many of the research programs within moral development have tended to organize around certain select features of the moral life. For the Kohlberg tradition, it was conflict resolution involving a moral dilemma where competing claims to justice had to be adjudicated fairly by the canons of deliberative reasoning. For Hoffman, it was coming to the aid of bystanders who were in distress. Prosocial reasoning was also a form of bystander intervention – should a farmer give up part of his crop for the sake of poor farmers down the road who were devastated by a flood? Should we donate blood at the risk of inconvenience? More recent research on moral exemplars has tended to focus on volunteering as the target moral behavior of interest. Each of these attributes of the moral life – dilemma-solving, bystander intervention, volunteering – privileges a particular element of human functioning – reason, empathy, identity – to carry much of the explanatory load.

In this issue, Pasupathi and Wainryb introduce a new construct – moral agency – to account for another feature of moral life, which is the experience of intentional moral failure, of visiting harm unto others with full knowledge that it is wrong to do so. Moral failure is, of course, a commonplace, and its ubiquity in human life

makes its study all the more pressing and timely, though it is surely a surprise that it has taken the field so long to address this all too human moral condition [Oser, 2005]. What are we to make of moral failure of this sort? Pasupathi and Wainryb suggest that when confronted with moral failure we construct narratives to help us make sense of our moral agency. We tell a story that references goals, desires, and beliefs and their dynamic interplay with situational complexities. The constructed narrative forces us to come to grips with the sort of person we claim ourselves to be, and opens the door for a more charitable and forgiving outlook on the moral failure of others. Of course moral agency is the ideal outcome of narrative construction. What is not ideal is a narrative rife with self-excusing evasion, although this option is a chronic temptation [Lapsley, 2009; Proulx & Chandler, 2009].

Pasupathi and Wainryb's narrative turn in moral development research is welcome. In their view narrating instances of intentional harm-doing is to submit negative moral experience to a kind of self-reflection that has certain structural properties with prospective action-guiding implications. It forces one to account for one's actions and in a way that balances one's own psychological content with those of others, even if it yields, as in the passage from *Little Gidding*, '... the rending pain of reenactment of all you have done and been, the shame of motives late revealed, and the awareness of things ill done and done to others' harm' [Eliot, 1943, p. 54]. In Eliot's great poem, this 'pain of reenactment' is one of three 'gifts reserved for age,' and so it is a capacity with a developmental trajectory. So too is narrative moral agency, and in a double sense. The kinds of narratives that are constructed show developmental improvement, and depend upon developmental achievements in other domains (e.g., theory of mind, tolerance of diversity of beliefs, self-identity). Moreover, narrative construction presumes an audience and the possibility of co-construction, and so highlights the interpersonal element of moral agency. There are both contextual and cultural elements to narrative moral agency as well. Clearly the present article points the way to a highly promising, field-expanding new research program within moral development.

The use of narrative categories to understand the construal of lives through time is a productive heuristic in personality, self, and identity development [Fivush & Haden, 2003; Hammack, 2008; Hammack, Thompson, & Pilecki, 2009; McAdams, 2008; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Pals, 2006] and its appeal for understanding moral development is of long standing [Day & Tappan, 1996]. Indeed, narrative is used increasingly to account for moral personality [McAdams, 2009], prosocial moral identity [Pratt, Arnold, & Lawford, 2009], and the characteristics of various moral exemplars [Walker & Frimer, 2009]. But its use here is valuable for at least two reasons. Narrative is deployed to account for a new region of the moral life (harm-doing) and for understanding a new construct (moral agency) that comes with it. And it does so with rich possibilities for integration with other developmental achievements, constructs, and literatures. Narrative moral agency is not an orphan construct but is informed deeply by achievements in non-moral developmental processes; this is a matter of importance to those who worry that moral psychology has become isolated from theoretical and empirical advances in other domains of psychology [Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005].

Pasupathi and Wainryb attempt to position *moral* agency within the landscape of current research programs in moral development, and *moral agency* within current research on closely allied constructs, such as efficacy control and self-determi-

nation. Their analysis of the moral domain will repay close study. Moral agency is defined in terms of morally relevant actions that have implications for justice and care. The emphasis on justice and care is a traditional way to bound moral development. Doing intentional harm puts one at odds with such moral principles, and the resulting tension invites narrative construction of moral agency. Failing in prosocial behavior does not require construction of moral agency because prosocial acts are not obligatory (under the definition of morality privileged by the cognitive developmental tradition, including domain theory). But the work of moral agency is not restricted to the moral domain thus defined but includes desires, beliefs, and emotions from multiple non-moral arenas as well. Put differently, reflection on one's moral agency is not a simple matter of making domain distinctions. Moral agency is singular, but its sources are plural.

Hence morally charged situations are complex, and so are the people caught up with them. Pasupathi and Wainryb note that domain theory does not help us understand how people make sense of the moral complexity of their harm-doing, other than to say that complex moral and non-moral issues must be coordinated; or that non-moral concerns must be subordinated to moral ones. How does that happen and who is most likely to do it successfully? As the authors put it, 'If, in making a judgment, an individual subordinates a moral consideration to a conventional or personal consideration, does this mean that she is no longer bothered by the moral implications of her decision or behavior?' [Pasupathi and Wainryb, this issue]. I would add that giving priority to morality over conventional and personal considerations does not always make decisions any easier, either, or come without psychological cost. In any event, moral agency occupies the psychological space posterior to domain coordination of complex behaviors and judgments.

Moral agency is also not to be confused with social intuitions or with moral identity. For the social intuitionist, the person who struggles with the consequences of harmful (unjust or uncaring) behavior is constructing a post hoc justification for a judgment made intuitively. Yet moral agency holds out the possibility that such constructions are not mere apologetics but can point toward positive moral development. When facing up to the complex realities of everyday quandary, it is possible to reverse one's intuitions, to take responsibility, condemn one's behavior or change one's moral perspective. Research on the moral self and moral identity does not quite capture moral agency either. Moral identity is concerned with 'individual differences in moral value centrality' [Pasupathi and Wainryb, this issue], but research has not yet identified a convincing developmental pathway (which is true), and extant investigations of moral identity are limited by the fact that they are typically referenced by prosocial but discretionary behavior, such as volunteering, rather than obligatory matters of justice, fairness, and harm. For all we know, postjudgment deliberations about harmful, unfair acts might induce disengagement from moral values, and the 'process of justification could exert lasting and detrimental effects on individual's moral identity development' [Pasupathi and Wainryb, this issue].

Narrative moral agency is positioned, then, in a way that stakes out new territory in the study of moral development. In doing so, it succeeds as a critique of domains, social intuitions, and identity. One almost wants to pile on. For example, with respect to domain theory, the authors wonder what it could mean for mixed domain issues to be coordinated or subordinated one to the other, and I would add that it is perhaps time to think more about what it means for morality to adhere 'intrinsic-

cally' to certain kinds of acts. Do acts have intrinsic properties of any kind? Do acts speak for themselves? What gives an act its moral quality may not be properties intrinsic to the act, *qua* act, and whatever this means, but rather the public significance or meaning the act possesses within a web of interlocution or language community [Taylor, 1989]. Moral identity research is found wanting for its narrow concern with prosocial volunteering and for its thin evidence of developmental variability, and I would add that not only is the developmental story inarticulate but assessment is still a challenge for moral identity research. The social intuitionist model has been influential and controversial, and in addition to the issues raised by the authors I would simply point to an exchange by Haidt [in press] and Narvaez [in press a, b] for further explication of various points of contention and agreement.

There are, however, at least three features of narrative moral agency that bear reflection. These features concern the conception of moral *agency*, the conception of *moral* agency, and the developmental account of the construct.

The Agent in Moral Agency

In the present analysis, moral agency is described as a certain kind of understanding that is hard-earned. It is the product of narrative construction after reflection on intentional harm-doing or other unjust, uncaring behavior. But here the language of agency gets in the way. Is agency, for example, an *understanding*? Is it a kind of *self-conception*? Is it something earned by *contemplation* and *reflection*? There are conceptions of personal agency that emphasized reflexivity as its defining feature [Wallace, 2006] and certainly the organismic model of Little, Snyder, and Wehmer [2006] viewed it this way. In their model, for example, agency beliefs and control expectancies are put in the pursuit of volitional goal-directed actions. But this model is not quite what is wanted insofar as Pasupathi and Wainryb bracket moral agency from notions of self-determination and self-regulation. Instead the authors focus on the phenomenological experience of moral agency while emphasizing 'the nature of the act as the core issue in determining whether the person is constructing a sense of moral agency, rather than a sense of agency around other domains' [Pasupathi and Wainryb, this issue].

There is something right about yoking a phenomenological perspective with a theory of action, but the result is not the self-reflective, narrative-constructing agent as required by Pasupathi and Wainryb's moral agency. For example, Macmurray [1957] argued that a proper conception of the self as agent requires the substitution of *I do* for *I think* as the starting point and frame of reference. 'The Self,' he wrote, 'is not the thinker but the doer' (p. 90). The *I do* is the primary principle that underlies all experience, even the experience of thinking. Blasi [1988] reached a similar position in his analysis of the self as subject. The self is not, in his view, something that is grasped primarily in contemplation or in the process of self-reflection. Instead, the self 'is grasped indirectly though immediately in and through every intentional action, having as direct objects external or even internal events' (p. 229). Moreover, the self has *agency* to the extent that an action is unreflectively grasped as one's own. For Blasi, agency is just one of four dimensions of the self as subject (Macmurray also distinguished the self as agent from the self as subject). In addition to agency, the self as subject is marked by *identity with oneself* (the immediate realization of oneself in

action as the aware self); by the experience of *unity* among actions belonging to the same agent, and by awareness of oneself as a separate agent, different from other agents in the performance of actions (*otherness*).

It seems hard to reconcile this account of self-agency or the self as subject with Pasupathi and Wainryb's moral agency. On the latter account, one is a moral agent to the extent that one has self-reflectively *figured things out* after intentional harm-doing *and* decided not to cave in to self-excusing rationalization. One is a moral agent to the extent that one's narrative reconstruction of moral failure includes the 'pain of re-enactment of all that you have done and been' (to cite *Little Gidding*). Certainly there is moral relevance to this outcome that reflects favorably on the quality of the person, but it is not one's *agency* that is at stake. Indeed, there is moral relevance to the actions and narrative reconstructions of unrepentant rogues and wantons, too, but it is not a sense of agency they are lacking. Agency only requires that actions and experiences be unreflectively grasped as one's own and that the self be experienced as the source of the action. By this criterion, both the virtuous and vicious person exhibit agency and other dimensions of the self as subject. In this view, then, narrative is the product of the agentic self as subject, not the other way round. What contemplation, judgment, and reflection bring forth in terms of narrative is of personal moral significance, but it presupposes agency and is not the result of it.

What the authors seem to want is a way to talk about the moral *agent* in a manner that does not reference constructs that are deemed suspect, such as moral self, identity, or personality. These latter constructs are judged of little use for the problematic that is targeted for study. Of course, moral agency without an agent is not conceivable, but neither is an agent without personality and selfhood. To that end, the language of moral self-identity and moral personality is not easily dispensed with, and, indeed, there is a way of reading the present work as a further articulation of these notions rather than as an introduction of a new construct.

To show how, consider the case of an individual who constructs a self-narrative that is oriented toward justice and care, after analyzing beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. On the authors' account, this is called *moral agency* (particularly, I gather, if the narrative is constructed after intentional harm-doing). What would analysis of beliefs, attitudes, and emotions amount to in the narrative construction of moral agency? I would argue that the kind of narratives constructed hinge on the moral personality of the agent. Narratives of *moral agency* are constructed by persons of a certain kind – moral persons, persons with an abiding commitment to morality that is deeply grounded as a foundational component of self-understanding, in other words, a person with moral self-identity. Put differently, what defines *moral agency* is not the act – acts don't speak for themselves – but the *agent*.

Frankfurt's [1971, 1988] famous account of personhood and agency is helpful here. He argued that *persons* (as opposed to *wantons*) order their lives around 'second-order desires.' That is, persons have the capacity to reflect upon their desires and motives, and to form judgments and desires with respect to them. A person cares about the sort of desires, characteristics and motives she has, and wants effectively to instantiate these in her life, to have them structure and impel the will and move her to action. When we want our desires to be willed, that is, to move us effectively to action, to that extent we have second-order volitions. In contrast, a *wanton* does not care about the desirability of his desires; does not care about his will. As Frankfurt [1971] put it, 'not only does he pursue whatever course of action he is most

strongly inclined to pursue, but he does not care which of his inclinations is the strongest' (p. 11).

I bring this up because when the authors argue that moral agency is constructed around narratives of desires, beliefs, and emotions, what they seem to have in mind are narratives concerning the second-order desires, beliefs, and emotions of moral persons. A person constructs narratives around moral notions because a person cares about the sort of desires one has; a person cares about the desirability of one's motives, attitudes, and beliefs. What the authors call narrative moral agency is likely the craft of moral agents, of moral persons driven by second-order volitions.

I do not imagine that the authors would disagree with this. But I press the matter to make two points. First, Frankfurt's writings on personhood have proven highly influential for contemporary accounts of moral self-identity and moral personality [Blasi, 2005; Lapsley, 2008; Wallace, 2006]. Second, if this account, or something like it, is congenial to what moral narrative development looks like, then the moral agency construct may well turn out to be a species of moral self-identity, or else the latter construct(s) warrant(s) a larger role in the narrative story of moral agency. In any event, perspectives on the moral self would seem to provide a rich resource for understanding the nature of the *psychological content* that determines whether narratives serve self-protective or self-restorative purposes.

The Moral in Moral Agency

For its novelty, the moral agency construct trades on a traditional understanding of the moral domain that has motivated the moral development paradigm for decades. It is a domain framed by Kantian deontology. It concerns prescriptive duties and obligations with respect to welfare, justice, and rights. Of course this is not the whole of morality but just the form of morality that has preoccupied developmental researchers for a long time. In addition to making decisions about what one *ought to do*, morality asks questions about what sort of *person to be* or to become and about the life worth living. How to live well the life that is good for one to live is a deeply ethical question that ranges far beyond issues of justice and welfare, as important as these are. It is my hope that the moral agency construct could enlarge the conception of the moral domain for developmental science (it is poised to do so), and be inclusive of these other ways of framing the ethical dimensions of human life, and not be content with staking out the domain solely in terms of the usual but limiting definitional preference for justice and welfare. Indeed, I am not sure what moral agency is about if it is not about the qualities of the agent, and once this is acknowledged then it seems we are moving into ethical terrain best traversed by other traditions such as virtue theory.

Lest I be misunderstood I want to say clearly that the divide between deontology and virtue theory is not as wide as imagined; that Kant, too, was a virtue theorist, and that Aristotle's views about habits and virtues include strong cognitivist elements [Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006]. If in Kantian formalism there is also a role for virtues, then from Aristotelian virtue theory it is also possible to derive prescriptions for behavior [Hursthouse, 2003]. But notice what happens when we sit on only one side of the divide. We could say, for example, as do the authors, that volunteering and other prosocial behavior is outside the concern of morality because it is discretionary

and non-obligatory. But only a strict deontologist could say this. One could ask – discretionary and non-obligatory from which point of view?

From the perspective of the agent, there might well exist maxims of behavior that compel not categorically but hypothetically, in the Kantian sense, maxims that one would never dream of universalizing but which also are not optional for the sort of person one claims the self to be. As McFall [1987] put it, ‘we all have things we think we would never do, under any imaginable circumstance; some part of ourselves beyond which we will never retreat, some weakness however prevalent in others that we will not tolerate in ourselves. And if we do betray that weakness, we are not the persons we thought: there is nothing left that we may even in spite refer to as I’ (p. 12).

This brings moral agency once again into the company of moral self-identity. A person whose self-identity is grounded by deep moral commitments may not find the prosocial act entirely optional and discretionary. Whether I give blood or volunteer or share at some personal cost, or whether I refrain from personal vices that others freely indulge, may not fall under the covering law of a categorical imperative to which duties attach, but these are not morally neutral, either, insofar as they speak to the cultivation of virtue and the accountability of the self for one’s own actions. These second-order volitions of the moral person (to borrow Frankfurt’s phrase) contribute to a sense of personal integrity in action. These are the ‘deepest most serious convictions we have; they define what we would not do, what we regard as outrageous and horrible; they are the fundamental conditions for being ourselves, for the integrity of our characters depends upon them’ [Kekes, 1989, p. 167].

I agree strongly with the authors’ suggestion that it is moral behavior in the breach that appears to engage our moral systems in a compelling way. Preliminary research in my lab is pointing in the same direction. But I would add that violation of self-integrity is also a moral issue; that moral failure comes in many personal forms and not just in *harm-doing*. Indeed, I used the expression *moral failure* intentionally in my summary of the authors’ paper (as opposed to *doing harm*) to illustrate the many places where narrative reconstruction of moral biography is required – not just in the ways that we fail the deontological requirements of justice and caring, not just on those occasions when we intentionally visit harm or uncaring upon another, but when we fail our conscience as well. I hope the authors will take this up as a friendly amendment to enlarge the scope of behavior for which narrative moral agency might apply. Perhaps a suitably broad, inclusive definition might encompass both *right relationship* and that which is *worth doing* [Stengel & Tom, 2006]. However it is conceived, I think it is time for researchers to open up the moral development playbook to take on the full range of human moral experience, and to this end the moral agency construct holds considerable promise for showing the way.

Development of Moral Agency – and the Moral Self

One of the strongly attractive features of the authors’ account of moral agency is its promise of a developmental grounding of the construct. The capacity and inclination to construct narrative moral agency is linked helpfully to other developmental competencies. I want to underscore, in particular, the authors’ reference to dialogue in mother-child dyads in helping children reconstruct the past into narrative

form. But dialogic interaction is not just about the source of narrative structure. Narrative reconstruction of the past does not simply provide structure to memories but may be crucial to the development of the moral self [Lapsley & Hill, 2009; Thompson, 2009].

Like the authors, Lapsley and Narvaez [2004] also attempted to provide a developmental account of the origins of the moral self in their social cognitive model of the moral personality. Like the authors, they pointed to the crucial role played by dialogical interactions with caregivers. For Lapsley and Narvaez [2004; Thompson, 2006] the development of the moral personality is built on the foundation of generalized event representations that characterize early socio-personality development. Event representations have been called the ‘basic building blocks of cognitive development’ [Nelson & Gruendel, 1981, p. 131], and they are progressively elaborated in early dialogues with caregivers who help children review, structure, and consolidate memories in script-like fashion [Fivush, Kuebli, & Chubb, 1992].

But the key characterological turn of significance for moral personality is how these early social-cognitive units are transformed from episodic into autobiographical memory. At some point, specific episodic memories must be integrated into a narrative form that references a self whose story it is. Parents help children organize events into personally relevant biographical memories by the frequency and kinds of questions they ask about daily routines or recent experiences. Parental interrogatives (‘what happened when you pushed your sister? What should you do next?’) are a scaffold that helps children structure events in narrative fashion, which provide, in turn, as part of the self-narrative, action-guiding scripts (‘apologize when you do harm’) that become frequently practiced, overlearned, routine, habitual, and automatic. Parental interrogatives might also include reference to norms, standards, and values so that the moral ideal self becomes part of the child’s autobiographical narrative. In our view, then, the narrative self that emerges from the early dialogic interactions with caregivers is also a moral self. Once again the moral self is companion to moral agency.

I noted earlier that narrative moral agency likely references something like the construction of second-order desires and volitions by (Frankfurt’s) persons. How do children develop the proper moral desires as second-order volitions? There is a developmental story to tell here as well, and we think Kochanska’s [2002a] model is a good place to start [Lapsley & Hill, 2009; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004]. The developmental source of the moral personality lies in the shared positive affective relationship with caregivers. It emerges as a precipitate of the *mutually responsive orientation* (MRO) [Kochanska, 1997, 2002a] that characterizes the interpersonal foundation of conscience. The MRO is characterized by shared positive affect, mutually coordinated enjoyable routines (*good times*), and a cooperative interpersonal set that describes the joint willingness of parent and child to initiate and reciprocate relational overtures. It is from within the context of the MRO, and the secure attachment that it denotes, that the child is eager to comply with parental expectations and standards. There is committed compliance [Kochanska, 2002b] on the part of the child with the norms and values of caregivers which, in turn, motivates moral internalization and the work of *conscience*.

The language of *conscience* is not welcome by many moral developmental theorists because it evokes shades of Freudian personality development; or else there is concern that Kochanska’s [2002a] model of the moral self yields only a morality of

compliance. But developmental acquisitions have to start somewhere. In our view, the compliance of the emergent moral self is not *mere* submission but rather a commitment motivated by strongly charged, mutually shared, positive affective interpersonal relationships with caregivers. Moral desires, in other words, must have a developmental source. The wholehearted commitment of the moral person to morality has to start from someplace and somewhere, and this starting point is the deeply relational and emotionally charged experience of committed compliance with the normative expectations and standards of attachment figures [Lapsley & Hill, 2009]. The demands and expectations of love do not always seem like a burden; meeting them does not always feel like compliance.

My point in wading through this is simply to note that it is difficult to talk about moral agency and its development without also implicating the moral self. The moral self emerges in the dynamic transaction between the inductive capacities and other personal qualities of the child and the familial and relational interactions that provide the context for development. And because of this, so does moral agency. The banality and ubiquity of moral self and the way it ramifies into developmental and personality constructs and processes of all kinds, including moral agency, points to a pressing need for comprehensive, intentional, integrative, and interdisciplinary approaches to its study [Lapsley & Hill, 2009].

Conclusion

Pasupathi and Wainryb's conception of narrative moral agency is an important new construct that will find its place among the progressive research programs in moral development. It is deployed to account for a neglected area of study, which is the experience of intentional moral failure, and it has strong integrative potential to inform, and be informed by, other developmental acquisitions. I have tried to show some of these connections here. The focus on the narrative construction of moral agency, in particular, will have a generative effect on research. I am confident that narrative moral agency will be invoked in many lines of inquiry that investigate the exigencies of personal and cultural identity.

In taking the long view of moral development, it was argued once that the field was at a crossroads [Lapsley & Narvaez, 2005]. This was said pessimistically, as it was difficult to see what more we could learn from the various stage theories, and optimistically as a way to frame certain thematic directions the field could take [Lapsley & Narvaez, 2005]. It is now abundantly clear that moral functioning is enjoying a remarkable renaissance of interest across a broad spectrum of psychological disciplines [Killen & Smetana, 2005; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008], including the various neurosciences [Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008]. The introduction of narrative moral agency by Pasupathi and Wainryb is illustrative of what I believe will be the hallmark of a new generation of moral development research. We are now seeing with more clarity how topics of long interest to developmental science – topics such as social referencing, internal working models, event representations, theory of mind, autobiographical memory, self-regulation, temperament – have implications for the developing moral self [Thompson, 2009], even though these are not typically considered contributions to a moral development literature.

Yet as Pasupathi and Wainryb have shown, it is no longer possible to talk about important acquisitions in moral development without implicating other developmental constructs and processes. Moral development theory will of necessity be integrative just because the moral self – and its agency – ramifies in so many different directions and hinges on acquisitions across the spectrum of developmental science. How these acquisitions are carried forward, how they take on dispositional qualities and are moderated by transactions with the world, and how they come to influence behavior and under what conditions, these are the pressing questions before the new field of moral development [Lapsley & Hill, 2009].

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