

Moral Self-Identity and the Social-Cognitive Theory of Virtue

DANIEL LAPSLEY

Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down.
—Robert Frost (“Mending Wall”)

I. A Historical Introduction

There is a discernible historical arc to the shifting boundary between ethical theory and empirical psychology. For much of the twentieth century American psychology, bound in the grip of behaviorism, was only too ready to shield empirical investigation from the intrusions of speculative metaphysics. The behaviorist stance on morality deemed ordinary moral language unsuitable for empirical inquiry without operational translation into the constructs of behavioral science. What was “good” and “right” or what one “ought” to do was behavior bound up with proper reinforcement schedules or else the product of reinforcement history. A shared problematic and shared language was hard to find, and so the boundary between philosophy and behavioral psychology was fenced, guarded, and rarely breached.

But all of this changed with the rise of the cognitive developmental paradigm associated with Piaget and Kohlberg (and the cognitive revolution more generally). Piaget’s genetic epistemology attempted to show how investigations into the stage properties of children’s understanding of logic, mathematical, and scientific concepts could yield criteria for discerning progress in these disciplines.¹ The facts of child development made suspect commitments to both *tabula rasa* empiricism and Cartesian rationalism.

Similarly, Kohlberg attempted to show how the ontogenesis of justice reasoning could yield grounds for rejecting ethical relativism. He argued that “empirical evidence could nullify or undermine the plausibility of our normative

claims.”² Just as Piaget appealed to developmental criteria to discern progress in science and philosophy, so too did Kohlberg press developmental claims against inadequate meta-theoretical positions in psychology (e.g., associationism, maturationism) and appraise the adequacy of different forms of moral reasoning (as represented by stages of moral judgment).³

Moreover, the cognitive developmental tradition assumed that the study of development necessarily conflates descriptive claims about what is the case and evaluative claims about what constitutes “good” development.⁴ Indeed, Kohlberg argued that the study of moral development revealed not only *how* to commit the so-called naturalistic fallacy but also how to *get away with it*.⁵ Unlike the behaviorists, Kohlberg insisted that ordinary moral language be the starting point of inquiry. The study of moral development must begin with certain meta-ethical assumptions that define a moral judgment.⁶ Kohlberg’s instruction on this was so successful that it was part of the received view that psychological explanation must be grounded by philosophical considerations.⁷ Psychological investigation in moral development is to be constrained by the definitional boundaries established by ethics. Put tendentiously, while ethics is autonomous, moral psychology is not.⁸

Hence, the cognitive developmental paradigm lowered the fence between philosophy and developmental psychology and effaced the boundary between ethical and moral stage theory. Indeed, it would be hard to miss the *mélange* of Kant, Hare, and Rawls built into the highest stage of principled moral reasoning. Yet the Kohlberg project failed on empirical grounds and theoretical revisions attempting to prop up it up had all the markings of a degenerating research program.⁹

In retrospect the meta-ethical commitments of Kohlberg’s project and his desire to use developmental data to defeat ethical relativism contributed to its eventual marginalization. For example, one meta-ethical assumption (the so-called principle of phenomenalism) was to insist that behavior has no particular moral status unless motivated by an explicit moral reason, where moral reasoning is the “conscious process of using ordinary moral language.”¹⁰ Agent phenomenology was the proper standpoint to evaluate the moral status of behavior. The principle of phenomenalism was used as a cudgel against behaviorism (which rejected both cognitivism and ordinary moral language) and psychoanalysis (which emphasized emotional drives and unconscious processes), and was so deeply rooted in the cognitive developmental tradition that Blasi could assert that morality “*by definition*, depends on the agent’s subjective perspective.”¹¹

Yet the principle of phenomenalism had a pernicious influence on the evolution of moral developmental psychology. It effectively ruled out research on the tacit, automatic, and implicit features of moral cognition, or made it

difficult to profit from these literatures.¹² The pursuit of an empirical basis for refuting ethical relativism also ruled out entire lines of research if they were deemed incompatible with Kantian moral agency or with demonstrating the truth of moral universalism. Slippery slopes to ethical relativism were found everywhere. Research on character, selfhood and personality, the mechanisms of internalization, and the study of moral dispositions and traits, or of moral emotions, were deemed suspect on these grounds. Moreover, the theory was silent about moral formation in early life and elided the commonsense idea that moral rationality attaches to selves who have personalities.¹³ It has nothing to say to parents concerned to raise children of a certain kind.

Hence, the gravitational pull of ethical theory disoriented the orbit of moral development research, insulating it from innovations that arose in post-Piagetian theories of intellectual development. It prevented easy commerce with other domains of empirical psychology that might have provided new insights into the nature of moral judgment and its development. In this way did moral stage theory become marginalized; and one is tempted to draw a lesson that such is the fate of any empirical theory taken over by a commitment to its meta-ethical assumptions or is sent chasing after strictly philosophical problems, although the collapse of the Piagetian paradigm is also part of the story.¹⁴

Yet, just when the field seemed to arrive at a bleak and uncertain crossroad,¹⁵ there was an explosion of interest in studying moral behavior across the many fields of psychology.¹⁶ There are now robust lines of inquiry in developmental and cognitive science¹⁷ and in personality and social psychology.¹⁸ There is interest in the moral brain,¹⁹ moral emotions,²⁰ and the neuroscience²¹ and neurobiology²² of moral behavior. The moral capacities of infants and toddlers are the target of sustained investigation,²³ as is the study of moral character in schools²⁴ and the workplace.²⁵ Indeed, the renaissance of moral psychology is barely captured by the proliferation of handbooks,²⁶ edited volumes,²⁷ and special journal issues.²⁸

One striking feature of this new wave of moral psychology is how much of it is driven by interdisciplinary conversation between ethics and psychology.²⁹ One source of the new wave is the naturalizing tendencies sweeping through contemporary philosophy.³⁰ This is particularly evident in virtue ethics where there is a broadly shared view that the starting point of ethical theory should be the facts of human nature³¹ and that reflection on the moral personality should be constrained by some degree of psychological realism.³² As McKinnon put it, "if ethics is to be about human lives lived well then certain facts about human nature must count as relevant in determining the plausibility of any ethical theory."³³ Moreover, getting the facts right in ethics "will invite cooperation with biology, psychology, ethology, sociology, even neuropsychology

and cognitive science, whose findings appear promising in the task of fleshing out the details of human nature."³⁴

The situationism debate has also pushed ethics and empirical psychology into quite neighborly dialogue. The longstanding view that virtues have dispositional properties that organize behavior in consistent ways across situations has been challenged by social psychology literatures that tend to doubt it.³⁵ Philosophers have engaged the literatures of empirical psychology to defend traditional notions of moral character or to devise alternative views that are better supported by psychological evidence.³⁶ For their part psychologists stepped up to propose theories of personality that might reconcile the claims of situationism with robust notions of moral character.³⁷

Fences and neighbors

The relationship between ethics and psychology has moved, then, from benign neglect during the behaviorist years, to active appropriation of ethical theory by developmental science during the ascendance of Kohlberg's paradigm, to the present phase of active collaboration and mutual correction. Indeed, if anything, psychologists should be flattered by the unaccustomed attention afforded their empirical literatures by ethicists and empirical philosophers.

The contemporary boundary between ethics and psychology has been likened to the Mending Wall described in Robert Frost's iconic poem.³⁸ The poem is remembered for the observation "*Good fences make good neighbors,*" although this line is often misinterpreted (I contend) when it is stripped from the context of the poem. It is typically interpreted to mean that a good neighbor is one we keep at arm's length behind a fence. The good neighbor is one we never see; who does not intrude and leaves us alone. A fence is good if it keeps them away. The relationship between ethics and behavioral psychology was once a lot like this.

But the poem comes to a completely different conclusion. At "*spring mending time*" neighbors must come together to repair the wall where gaps have appeared, where boulders have tumbled so that "*even two can pass abreast.*" The neighbors come together to walk the line "*and set the wall between us once again,*" wearing their fingers rough handling the boulders. And it amazes the narrator because all of this wall-building is quite unnecessary because when it comes down to it the wall is not needed: "*He is all pine and I am apple orchard/ My apple trees will never get across/ And eat the cones under his pines . . .*" But the laconic neighbor will have none of it. He only says: "*Good fences make good neighbors.*"

A fence is “good,” then, not because it keeps neighbors apart but because it brings them together. Were it not for a fence there would be no occasion to collaborate on a common project. Repairing the breach brings out virtues and makes good neighbors, probably in some ethical sense of good. It is in this spirit that psychologists walk the mending wall with ethicists, as we handle the rough stones that have emerged in the boundary between ethics and psychology. Although the disciplines enjoy relative autonomy (“*He is all pine and I am apple orchard*”), there are occasions for ethicists and psychologists to walk the line together to insure that we are doing empirically responsible moral philosophy and philosophically responsible moral psychology. The present volume is one of those times.

The present chapter

The moral dimension of personality is traditionally captured by the ethical language of *virtue* and *character*, and by the psychological language of *traits*. A person of good character, on this account, is someone who is in trait-possession of the virtues. While not disputing the power of this conception, I want to try another starting point and argue that a social-cognitive account of moral personality, one that focuses on the centrality of morality to self-identity and on its cognitive accessibility for appraising the social landscape, is a useful way to understand moral personality and for grounding a psychologically realistic notion of virtuous dispositions.

The social-cognitive account of moral character has at least six attractive features that recommend it. (1) The theory is informed by and trades on key formulations in ethical theory. Hence, it stretches a hand across the mending wall. (2) As a theory of personality it accounts for individual differences in moral character. (3) It yields a well-attested account of situational variability in the display of moral dispositions, and therefore is responsive to the situationist challenge. (4) It accounts for the automatic and implicit characteristics of moral social cognition. (5) It anticipates surprising new facts about moral behavior, including what happens when individuals establish their *moral credentials* and the related phenomena of *moral cleansing*. This content-increasing aspect of moral identity theory satisfies an important Lakatosian criteria for denoting a progressive research program.³⁹ (6) It tells a plausible story concerning the social-cognitive development of moral self-identity.

I hope to make the case for these six claims in the present chapter. In the next section I situate the moral self-identity construct by reference to its philosophical and psychological sources. Frankfurt’s distinction between the first- and second-order desires of persons and wantons, and Taylor’s account of strong evaluation, provided the conceptual grounding for Blasi’s influential

account of moral identity in developmental psychology.⁴⁰ After describing Blasi’s moral identity I outline the social-cognitive alternative, including a survey of its empirical warrant. I conclude with a reflection on the implications of moral identity for ethical theory.

II. Situating Moral Self-Identity

The affinity of selfhood and morality is a theme in several psychological traditions. Erikson argued, for example, that an ethical capacity is the “true criterion of identity,” but he also noted that “identity and fidelity are necessary for ethical strength.”⁴¹ This suggests that moral identity is the clear goal of both moral and identity development and that the two developmental tracks are ideally conjoined in adult personality. Similarly, Damon and Hart showed that within each domain of the “Me Self” (*physical, active, social, psychological*) the highest level of self-understanding (as self-concept) implicates a moral point of view.⁴² This suggests that an orientation toward morality is the clear outcome of self-development.⁴³ Indeed, recent research has shown that morality is considered indispensable to selfhood; it is the moral self that is essential to our identity, more than personality traits, memory, or desires.⁴⁴ Moral categories are more chronically accessible than competence traits and dominate our impression formation.⁴⁵ It is moral character that is most distinctive about identity and what we care most about in others.⁴⁶

The increasing prominence of moral self-identity in psychology is reflected also by recent trends in contemporary ethics that draw a close connection between morality and selfhood.⁴⁷ Taylor argued, for example, that “being a self is inseparable from existing in a space of moral issues.”⁴⁸ On this view identity is the product of strong evaluation; it is defined by reference to things that have significance for us. Strong evaluators make ethical assessments of first-order desires.⁴⁹ They make discriminations about what is worthy or unworthy, higher or lower, better or worse; and these discriminations are made against a “horizon of significance” that frames and constitutes who we are as persons. “To know who I am,” Taylor writes, “is a species of knowing where I stand.”⁵⁰ He continues: “My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good or valuable, or what ought to be done or what I endorse or oppose.”⁵¹ The importance of commitments and identifications and the horizon of significance imply that moral self-identity is not strictly a *personal* achievement but requires settings and contexts that canalize, evoke, or inspire an orientation toward morality. Moral formation is as much about the selection of right contexts as it is the development of personal virtue.

Taylor's account of strong evaluation was influenced by Frankfurt's distinction between persons and wantons.⁵² A person has the capacity to reflect upon desires and motives and to form judgments with respect to them. A person cares about the sort of desires, characteristics, and motives one has, and wants effectively to instantiate these in one's life (as "second-order desires"). And to the extent that a person wishes second-order desires to effectively move one "all the way to action," that is, to be *willed*, to that extent do we have *second-order volitions*.⁵³ Individuals who have second-order volitions are *persons*; those who do not are *wantons*. A wanton does not care about the desirability of his desires. He writes "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."⁵⁴

Blasian moral identity

I doubt there are real wantons in the world (unless as a form of psychopathology), yet Frankfurt's account of how personhood hinges on the importance of what we care about had an outsized influence on moral development theory. It greatly influenced, for example, Augusto Blasi's writings on moral self-identity. Blasi was concerned to render a better account of the relationship between moral judgment and moral action.⁵⁵ After all, knowing the right thing to do, and then doing it, are very different things.

Blasi argued that a person is more likely to follow through with what moral duty requires to the extent that one identifies with morality and cares about it as a second-order desire. Moral identity is marked by *second-order volitions* (Frankfurt) and *strong evaluation* (Taylor). The moral person constructs self-identity around a commitment to morality. One has a moral identity to the extent that moral notions, such as being good, just, compassionate, or fair, is judged to be central, essential, and important to one's self-understanding and when moral claims stake out the very terms of reference for the sort of person one claims to be. And failing to act in a way consistent with what is central, essential, and important to (moral) identity is to risk self-betrayal, and herein lays the motivation for moral behavior. We are motivated to behave in self-consistent ways. A gap in moral judgment and moral action there may be, but it is breached most often by individuals with a sharply articulated moral identity.

But moral self-identity is also a dimension of individual differences and hence is a way of talking about personality. Presumably not everyone constructs the self by reference to morality. For some individuals moral considerations rarely penetrate their understanding of who they are as persons; nor influence their outlook on important issues; nor "come to mind" when faced

with the innumerable transactions of daily life. Some have only a glancing acquaintance with morality but choose to define the self by reference to other priorities; or else incorporate morality into their personality in different degrees; or emphasize some moral considerations ("justice") but not others ("caring").

In his more recent writings Blasi attempted to show how moral self-identity connects to notions about character and the language of virtues.⁵⁶ Like many others he distinguished between two levels of virtues. Lower-order virtues are those targeted by ethicists and easily generated by educators and parents: fairness, honesty, courage, empathy, kindness, fairness, among others. It is easy to notice that the lists of favored traits "frequently differ from each other, are invariably long and can be easily extended, and are largely unsystematic."⁵⁷ These are self-concept traits that attach to the "Me-as-Known."

In contrast, higher-order traits reflect attributes of the agentic "I-as-Knower" and includes clusters of *willpower* and *integrity* dispositions. Willpower permits effective self-regulation and self-control: the ability to break down problems, set goals, focus attention, avoid distractions, and resist temptation; the ability to keep one's eye on the prize by showing grit and perseverance and other performance character abilities. The cluster of integrity skills motivates internal self-consistency: being a person of one's word, being transparent to the self, being responsible and self-accountable, avoiding self-deception. According to Blasi integrity is felt as *responsibility* when the self is constrained with intentional acts of self-control in wholehearted pursuit of moral aims.⁵⁸ Integrity is felt as *identity* when self-understanding is imbued with moral desires. When constructed in this way living out one's moral commitments does not feel like a choice but is felt instead as a matter of self-necessity.

Promising leads and challenges

Several lines of research are invoked to support the general thrust of Blasi's theory. For example, moral identity is used to explain the motivation of individuals who sheltered Jews during the Nazi Holocaust.⁵⁹ Rescuers often dismiss any notion that what they did was heroic—what else could I do?—was a typical response. The study of moral exemplars—adults whose lives are marked by extraordinary moral commitment—reveal a sense of self that is aligned with moral goals; and moral action undertaken as a matter of felt necessity rather than as a product of effortful deliberation.⁶⁰

Similar findings are reported in studies of youth. In one study adolescents who were nominated by community organizations for their uncommon prosocial commitment ("care exemplars") were more likely to include moral goals and moral traits in their self-descriptions than were matched comparison

adolescents.⁶¹ Moral exemplars show more progress in adult identity development⁶² and report self-conceptions replete with agentic themes, ideological depth, and commitment to future goals that focus on the betterment of society.⁶³

Yet Blasi's moral identity faces certain challenges as well. Shao et al. argue that Blasi's "character-based" approach covers only a small slice of the moral domain.⁶⁴ It is limited, for example, only to moral behavior that is a product of effortful deliberation and explicit invocation of the moral law and therefore misses everyday morality that is driven by tacit, automatic, or heuristic processes. In addition it ignores the multifaceted and heterogeneous nature of the self and fails to specify when and under what conditions moral identity will activate behavior relative to other identities.

Nucci argues similarly that the self-system is heterogeneous and domain specific and that Blasi's theory fails to specify just when moral identity is evinced and under what conditions.⁶⁵ He wonders "Does moral identity shift with each context?" suggesting that perhaps Blasi's moral identity has a situationism problem.⁶⁶ Moreover, even moral exemplars (not to mention the rest of us) show great variability in the display of virtue or have moral blind spots; and deep moral commitments can look a lot like moral rigidity, the fanaticism of the terrorist (e.g., what do we make of the moral identity of John Brown, a Weather Underground bomber, a 9/11 hijacker?), or the unrelenting earnestness of the moral saint. The lack of a developmental theory is also held against Blasi's moral identity.⁶⁷

There is an impression, then, that Blasi's moral identity is an adhesive personal quality that carries forward strong evaluation and second-order volitions across contexts, impervious to the evidence of situational variability.⁶⁸ It is a settled and static dimension of personality that one *has*, if one has it at all.⁶⁹ Yet this notion that moral self-identity is a dimension of individual differences seems challenged by evidence that everybody thinks morality is important,⁷⁰ that moral character is considered essential to person perception and social appraisal,⁷¹ and that the moral self is essential to our identity as persons.⁷²

So Blasi's moral identity catches it from all directions. It is scored for being a totalizing aspect of personality rather than as part of a self-system that is heterogeneous, dynamic, and constituted by plural identifications. It is criticized for being insensate to situational complexity, and taken to task for not specifying when its display should vary from context to context. Moreover, the claim that moral centrality is a dimension of individual differences collides with empirical evidence that just about everyone thinks the moral self is central to personality.

What is required is a conception of moral self-identity that preserves three key insights of Blasi's theory: (1) that morality is central to the identity of at

least some (or maybe most) individuals, and that moral self-identity (2) has a strong cognitive component and (3) is a dimension of personality and individual differences. Moral centrality, cognition, and individual differences, then, must be part of any robust conception of moral identity. But these features must be reconciled with evidence of situational variability. It must make room for emotional components and the tacit and automatic properties of cognition. And it must tell a plausible developmental story.⁷³ In the next section I describe the social-cognitive approach to moral self-identity that meets these conditions. Moreover, there is now an impressive and growing empirical literature that attests to the progressive nature of this research program.

III. The Social-Cognitive Approach

Social-cognitive theory emphasizes not what traits people *have*, but rather what people *do* when they construe their social landscape. The structural units of personality are within-individual, cognitive-affective mechanisms that are "in the head," as it were.⁷⁴ It includes *knowledge structures* that are used to encode features of situations, *self-reflective* processes through which individuals construct self-beliefs and attributions which contribute to affective and behavioral tendencies, and *self-regulatory* processes through which individuals set goals, evaluate progress, and maintain a motivational focus.⁷⁵ The emphasis is on how individuals notice, interpret, and construe the social dimensions of their experience in accordance with mental constructs such as scripts, schemas, and prototypes.⁷⁶

According to Cantor scripts, schemas, and prototypes (among other social-cognitive constructs) are the "cognitive carriers of dispositions" that are organized around particular aspects of experience.⁷⁷ Social-cognitive schemes guide appraisal of social situations, memory for events, and affective reactions. They "demarcate regions of social life and domains of personal experience to which the person is especially tuned, and about which he or she is likely to become a virtual 'expert.'" ⁷⁸ Linking the work of social-cognitive schemas to expertise is important in two ways. It illustrates how schemas can maintain patterns of individual differences, and it opens up a way to introduce automaticity and heuristic processes into (moral) personality functioning.⁷⁹

For example, schemas that are chronically accessible direct our attention to certain features of our experience at the expense of others. Moreover, the schematic nature of information processing disposes experts to notice key features of domain-relevant activity that novices miss. Hence, environmental scanning is more richly informative for experts than it is for novices. Chess,

sporting, and teaching experts “see” more of an event than do novices in these domains.⁸⁰ A shy schematic, for example, or an aggressive person, is more likely to notice (or remember) instances that require social reticence or aggressive conduct, respectively, than are individuals who are “social novices” in these domains (i.e., not shy or not aggressive). Hence, experts see the world differently than do novices. What we see depends on *who we are*.⁸¹

Moreover, schemas dispose individuals to seek out and select schema-relevant tasks, goals, and settings that serve to canalize dispositional tendencies.⁸² A shy schematic is likely to choose, over time, a “risk-avoidance” strategy when it comes to social goals, thereby reinforcing a particular pattern of social interactions. Experts in other domains similarly choose settings, set goals, or engage in activities that support or reinforce schema-relevant interests. Moreover, individuals tend to develop highly practiced behavioral routines in those areas of experience bounded by chronically accessible schemas. This provides “a ready, sometimes automatically available plan of action in such life contexts.”⁸³ Experts, then, possess procedural knowledge that has a high degree of automaticity.

Schema accessibility and conditions of activation, then, are critical for understanding how patterns of individual differences are channeled and maintained. The more frequently a construct is activated or the more recently it is primed the more accessible it should be for appraising the social landscape.⁸⁴ Chronically accessible constructs are at a higher state of activation than are inaccessible constructs and are produced so efficiently as to approach automaticity. Constructs can be made accessible by contextual (situational) priming, as well as by chronicity, and these two sources of influence combine in an additive fashion to influence social information processing.⁸⁵ Moreover, the accessibility of a construct is assumed to emerge from a developmental history of frequent and consistent experience with a specific domain of social behavior, so that it becomes more likely than other constructs to be evoked for the interpretation of interpersonal experience. Consequently, individual differences in construct accessibility emerge because of each person’s unique social developmental history. Since the social experiences of individuals vary widely, it is likely that there should also be individual differences in the accessibility, indeed, even in the availability, of social-cognitive constructs.

Schema accessibility, centrality, and the moral person

The application of social-cognitive theory to the moral domain is straightforward. Lapsley and Narvaez argued, for example, that moral personality is best understood in terms of the chronic accessibility of morally relevant schemas

for construing social events.⁸⁶ A moral person, on this account, is one for whom moral constructs are chronically accessible and easily activated by contextual primes. If having a moral identity is just when moral notions are central, important, and essential to one’s self-understanding, then notions that are central, important, and essential should also be those that are chronically accessible for appraising the social landscape.⁸⁷ Highly accessible moral schemas provide a dispositional readiness to discern the moral dimensions of experience, as well as to underwrite the discriminative facility in selecting situationally appropriate behavior.

Karl Aquino and his colleagues also embrace a social-cognitive theory of moral identity but improve it in several ways.⁸⁸ Aquino and Reed’s 2002 account retains the language of centrality and self-importance of morality to the self-concept, and the notion that accessibility and chronicity of moral schemas are the cognitive carriers of moral dispositions. But what is more clearly articulated in Aquino and Reed’s model is the fact that moral identity competes with other identities that constitute the self-system. The moral self-system is heterogeneous and interacts dynamically with contexts. This emphasis evades the criticisms leveled against Blasi’s theory that moral identity is static, totalizing, and unresponsive to context.

Hence, for Aquino and Reed a person’s moral identity is a schema consisting of a network of moral trait associations (e.g., being compassionate, fair, kind, honest) that is stored in memory as a complex knowledge structure.⁸⁹ Individuals whose moral identity occupies greater centrality within the self-concept should perceive that being a moral person is more self-defining than other identities (and should therefore exert more influence on behavior). Moreover, traits that are more central to the self-concept should have greater activation potential. Indeed, moral identity, when accessible or primed, has a spreading activation effect on additional ethical subcategories throughout the cognitive system, thereby bringing online a vast network of morally relevant associations.

Of course most of us have multiple identities in our working self-concept (e.g., professor, spouse, family member, Dylan fan, Steeler Nation, Fighting Irish, political affiliation, Roman Catholic). The self-concept is a network of identity schemes, but not all of them can be active at any one time, given the limitations of working memory. Whether any of them are influential is partly a function of how trait accessibility interacts with situational cues. Situational cues can activate or deactivate the accessibility of moral identity, or else activate some other identity at odds with morality. Hence, situations are crucial to any social-cognitive theory of virtue. A situation that primes or activates the accessibility of moral identity strengthens the motivation to act morally. Situational factors that decrease accessibility weaken moral motivation.

Explanatory reach

A social-cognitive model of moral personality accounts for the felt necessity of moral commitments often reported by moral exemplars: their experience of moral clarity or felt conviction that their decisions are evidently appropriate, justified, and true. Typically, moral exemplars report that they "just knew" what was required of them, automatically as it were, without the experience of working through an elaborate decision-making calculus.⁹⁰ Yet this is precisely the outcome of preconscious activation of chronically accessible constructs that it should induce strong feelings of certainty or conviction with respect to social judgments.⁹¹

Relatedly, the social-cognitive approach does not assume that all relevant cognitive processing is controlled, deliberate, and explicit. Indeed, there is now mounting evidence that much of our behavior is driven by cognitive processes that are tacit, implicit, and automatic. There is no reason to think that automaticity is evident in every domain of decision-making except the moral domain. Indeed, the intersection of the morality of everyday life and the "automaticity of everyday life" must be large and extensive, and any adequate theory of moral personality must account for this.⁹² But in contrast to social intuitionist theory,⁹³ which frontloads automaticity on the basis of evolved hardwired capacities, the social-cognitive account locates automaticity on the back end of development as the result of repeated experience, instruction, intentional coaching, and socialization.⁹⁴ It is the automaticity that comes from expertise in life domains where we have vast experience and well-practiced behavioral routines.⁹⁵

The social-cognitive approach also retains the central importance of cognition for understanding the moral person, although cognition is not a simple matter of deliberative reason, practical wisdom, or cognitive structures undergoing Piagetian stage development. Instead, the resources of post-Piagetian theories of intellectual development are brought to bear, including the work of memory processes, schema accessibility, and conditions of activation. In addition, the social-cognitive approach views personality as a "cognitive-affective system" where emotional states are a regulatory factor within the information-processing system. Affect and cognition are conceptualized as interwoven processes. Affect guides selective memory retrieval, influences perceptual vigilance, and constrains attentional resources available for reflective appraisal and response selection.⁹⁶ Understanding personality as a cognitive-affective system is in contrast to some approaches in moral psychology that tend to segregate moral cognition and moral emotions.

Finally, a social-cognitive model of the moral personality can account for situational variability in the display of a virtue. Any suitable theory of moral

personality must account for the dynamic interplay of situational affordance and mental construal that underwrites moral choice and behavior. The discriminative facility in selecting situationally appropriate behavior is driven by schema accessibility that arises through either chronicity or situational priming. This model underscores the fact that persons and contexts interact in complex ways, and that a stable behavioral signature is to be found at the intersection of person x context interactions. As a result, the social-cognitive approach is not helpless in the face of the situationist challenge to dispositions.

IV. The Empirical Warrant

There is one more advantage to the social-cognitive approach to moral self-identity: it has generated an impressive empirical record to corroborate its central claims.⁹⁷ I am aware of no other approach to moral personality that has compiled as impressive a track record; and empirically responsible virtue theory has already taken notice.⁹⁸

Research by Bryan, Adams, and Monin showed, for example, that framing behavior in terms that implicate the moral self ("don't be a cheater") is more effective in checking dishonesty than is framing events as behavioral exhortations ("don't cheat"), suggesting a strong connection between moral self-identity and moral behavior.⁹⁹ Individuals with strong moral identity have a principled (vs. expedient) ethical ideology,¹⁰⁰ report stronger moral obligation to help and share resources with outgroups,¹⁰¹ prefer to donate personal time for charitable causes rather than just give money,¹⁰² and include more people into their "circle of moral regard"¹⁰³ than do individuals whose moral identity is not central to self-understanding. Moral identity influences the service and political involvement of adolescents¹⁰⁴ and provides an interpretive lens for appraising the honesty of leaders.¹⁰⁵ Individuals with strong moral identity are more empathic,¹⁰⁶ show greater moral attentiveness,¹⁰⁷ and are less aggressive¹⁰⁸ and less likely to engage in organizational deviance¹⁰⁹ and unethical behavior at work.¹¹⁰

In addition, individuals with strongly central moral identity experience more intense moral elevation, recall more acts of moral goodness, and are more desirous of being a better person after witnessing or reading about acts of uncommon goodness.¹¹¹ They are less likely to adopt moral disengagement strategies,¹¹² derogate outgroups,¹¹³ or otherwise resort to cognitive rationalizations that justify visiting harm upon others.¹¹⁴ Moral identity predicts health outcomes and psychological well-being,¹¹⁵ and individuals with psychopathic traits may dispose to antisocial behavior because they do not experience their personal identity in moral terms.¹¹⁶

Additional research addresses the implicit aspects of moral identity. For example, Perugini and Leone¹¹⁷ compared an implicit measure of moral self-concept (based on the Implicit Association Test [IAT]) with an explicit self-report measure of moral personality.¹¹⁸ They found that the implicit moral self-concept predicted actual moral behavior, while the explicit self-rating measure predicted responses to hypothetical moral scenarios. Similarly, Johnson and colleagues showed that the implicit moral IAT predicted physiologically measured moral outrage, while an explicit measure predicted religiosity and responses to hypothetical scenarios.¹¹⁹ They concluded that "moral identity operates through dual processes similar to other aspects of social cognition."¹²⁰

Two recent reports demonstrate the subtle ways that moral identity interacts with situational cues. In one report Aquino and colleagues demonstrated how moral identity can be activated or deactivated with different priming conditions and how moral identity moderates the influence of situational primes.¹²¹

Their first study is illustrative. It tested the claim that a moral prime ("Please list as many of the 10 Commandments as you can") would increase the intention to behave morally (initiate a marketing campaign that would benefit others but at a cost to the self) by increasing the current accessibility of moral identity within the working self-concept. Current accessibility was measured by requiring participants to rank five possible identities on a scale ranging from "Most reflect how you see yourself" to "Least reflect how you see yourself." The identity options were as follows: moral person, successful person, family member, independent person, and student. Moral identity centrality was measured by the oft-used 5-item measure of moral internalization developed by Aquino and Reed.¹²²

But the interesting claim tested in Study 1 was that the moral prime would not be uniformly effective in increasing moral behavior across the board for all participants. For example, it was not expected to influence the behavior of individuals for whom moral identity was already highly accessible, that is, individuals with high moral identity centrality. For these individuals the prime is superfluous because moral identity was already online. Instead, the strongest impact of the prime was expected for participants whose moral identity would not otherwise be accessible without it, that is to say, for individuals with low moral identity centrality. This is precisely what was found in Study 1.

Yet even highly central moral identity can be trumped if its accessibility is blocked by stronger contextual cues that displace it in the working self-concept in favor of other kinds of identity. In their second study Aquino et al. showed that the presence of financial incentives to negotiate the lowest starting salary for a job candidate increased intentions to lie, but the strongest effect was on

individuals with high moral identity centrality, presumably because financial incentives reduced the accessibility of moral identity.¹²³ In other words, a situational factor can reduce the motivation to behave morally if it reduces the accessibility of moral identity. In contrast, financial incentives had little effect on individuals for whom moral identity was already dormant.

Aquino and colleagues thus document crucial mediating mechanisms for linking moral identity to moral behavior.¹²⁴ So much depends on the accessibility of moral identity within the working self-concept, and on how situational factors can sustain the accessibility of identity or displace it, and thereby influence behavior. How subtle contextual cues activate moral identity *even outside of conscious awareness* and shape both moral intuitions and moral behavior was demonstrated in two studies reported by Leavitt and colleagues.¹²⁵

In this project a word completion task was used to prime moral identity without arousing conscious awareness. Participants also responded to the Aquino and Reed explicit measure of moral identity.¹²⁶ The dependent variable was the implicit association between "ethical" and "business" (using the IAT). The results showed that priming moral identity outside of conscious awareness decreased the implicit belief that business is ethical (Study 1) and increased the circle of moral regard (Study 2) to include external stakeholders beyond the narrow confines of typical corporate interests (e.g., shareholders, employees). Moreover, there was no relationship between self-reported explicit moral identity with implicit content or with the IAT, suggesting that the effect of the moral identity prime occurred outside of conscious awareness.

These data show, then, that it is possible to encourage individuals to make more ethical judgments by subtle contextual cues that restructure moral intuitions on the fringe of consciousness, and that people can be induced to do good "without knowing it."¹²⁷ This corroborates a claim by Narvaez and Lapsley that moral identity can exert its influence on behavior through different forms of conditional automaticity.¹²⁸

For example, *preconscious automaticity* describes the involuntary activation of social constructs (e.g., schemas, scripts, plans, stereotypes, prototypes) outside of conscious awareness that exert a pervasive interpretive influence over social information-processing; *preconscious automaticity* is also responsible for our strong feelings of certainty and conviction. Something like this is evident in the data reported by Leavitt et al.¹²⁹ *Post-conscious automaticity* refers to the way conscious activation of a moral concept can reverberate throughout the cognitive system to automatically influence the threshold for social perception of other related concepts. This is most evident in moral identity priming studies that appeal to the mechanism of spreading activation.¹³⁰

Does moral identity have a dark side?

There is fascinating research on the relationship between moral identity and its role in establishing moral credentials. Monin and Miller showed that when individuals established their moral credentials as unprejudiced, they were more likely to later make prejudiced remarks or choices.¹³¹ Relatedly, when there are threats to moral identity individuals are more likely to overestimate their moral credentials, as if to reassure themselves that their moral identity is secure. Effron showed, for example, that when white participants had cause to worry that their future behavior could seem racist, they overestimated how much a prior decision of theirs would convince an observer that they were not prejudiced.¹³² Moreover, as Effron put it, “when people anticipate needing evidence of their morality, they expect their behavior to be judged against lower moral standards and thus to earn them better moral credentials”; or else they point to “paltry virtues in one’s past” to license unethical behavior.¹³³

Moral identity is also implicated in a tendency to engage in *moral cleansing* behavior. Moral cleansing is a way to prop up or restore moral self-concept when one has engaged in (or merely recalled or contemplated) unethical behavior. For example, individuals are more likely to volunteer or perform prosocial behavior after committing an immoral action.¹³⁴ Individuals who recall past immoral behavior are more likely to report extensive participation in moral activities, strong prosocial intentions, and a reduced proclivity to cheat.¹³⁵ In one study participants were administered tasks of varying levels of difficulty with incentives to cheat and an opportunity to financially harm another person.¹³⁶ The results showed that individuals engaged in more moral cleansing as the level of incentive to cheat increased, and especially when their actions resulted in direct harm to another.

Hence, threats to moral identity can increase the tendency to engage in moral cleansing. When moral identity is threatened by unethical conduct we are motivated to restore it by taking compensatory action. According to Jordan et al., individuals are motivated to see the self as moral, and when confronted with evidence (or memories) of immoral behavior, tend to take compensatory steps to restore a sense of self-completion.¹³⁷

But self-affirmation can yield its own problems. One study showed that individuals engage in fewer moral behaviors after writing about themselves using positive language, perhaps because positive self-appraisal issues a license to act immorally.¹³⁸ Similarly, individuals whose self-concept became more positive after imagining doing a virtuous act (volunteering for community service) subsequently made more self-indulgent consumer choices.¹³⁹

Moral identity as a progressive research program

Lakatos argued that progressive research programs must account for deficiencies of rival programs and anticipate novel facts, some of which are corroborated.¹⁴⁰ The social-cognitive approach to moral identity is clearly progressive on this score. It predicts a wide swath of morally relevant social behavior, as we have seen. Indeed, the sheer variety of behavioral outcomes predicted by moral identity is unrivaled by traditional trait models of moral personality. Furthermore the social-cognitive framework outperforms Blasiian accounts of moral identity by its ability to predict situational variability in the display of virtue. Accordingly it has something to say about the so-called “situationist” challenge to moral dispositions. It offers a well-attested explanation for the uneven display of virtue in the character of exemplars (and in our own lives) and the heterogeneity of the moral self-system. It makes startling predictions about moral cleansing, credentials, and licensing, which extends moral identity theory into novel, productive directions. And it does so with a powerful theoretical framework that connects meaningfully with traditions of ethical theory and social-cognitive personality theory. The social-cognitive theory of moral identity, on these grounds, is certainly a progressive problem-shift in our understanding of the moral personality.

V. Whither Development?

There is still the matter of understanding the social-cognitive development of moral identity. The lack of a suitable account of development is thought to be a weakness of moral self-identity theory.¹⁴¹ Yet there are plausible accounts of early socio-personality development that address the source of moral chronicity and wholehearted commitment in early life, and there is a promising empirical basis as well.¹⁴² For example, one account argues that moral chronicity is built upon the foundation of generalized event representations that toddlers construct in early life.¹⁴³ Event representations are working models of how social routines unfold (“bedtime”) and what one can expect from social experience. They have been called the “basic building blocks of cognitive development”¹⁴⁴ that become progressively elaborated in dialogic exchanges with caregivers.¹⁴⁵

Folding episodic event representations into autobiographical memory is a key step in self-development. Specific episodic memories must be integrated into a narrative that references a self whose story it is. Autobiographical memory, like the elaboration of event representations, is a social construction. Parents teach children how to construct narratives by the questions that they

ask of past events (“Where did we go yesterday?” “What did we see?” “Who was there?” “What did we do next?”). Typical research has focused on the prosaic routines of early life (“going to McDonalds”), but the model is easily extended to routines of significance for moral formation (“pushing your sister”). Parental interrogatives (“What did you do?” “See how you made her cry.” “What do you do next?”) provide a scaffold to help children identify the salient features of an experience, such as sequence, causal significance, and timing, thereby helping children structure events in narrative fashion.¹⁴⁶

A sense of morality can become a part of the child’s autobiographical narrative to the extent that parents reference norms, standards, and values in their dialogic interactions; or else encourage action-guiding scripts (“I say sorry”) that become frequently practiced, over-learned, routine, habitual, and automatic. In this way parents help children identify morally relevant features of their experience and encourage the formation of social-cognitive schemas that are chronically accessible.

If moral identity is partly defined by the importance of what we care about, where does that come from? What is the developmental source of our second-order moral desires? There are clues in Grazyna Kochanska’s research on the development of conscience in early childhood. Kochanska proposed a two-step model of emerging morality that begins with the quality of parent-child attachment.¹⁴⁷ A strong, mutually responsive relationship with caregivers orients the child to be receptive to parental influence. Within the bond of a secure attachment the child is eager to comply with parental expectations and standards. There is “committed compliance” on the part of the child to the norms and values of caregivers which, in turn, motivates moral internalization and the work of conscience (operationalized as out-of-sight compliance).

Kochanska’s model moves, then, from security of attachment to committed compliance to moral internalization. This movement is also expected to influence the child’s emerging internal representation of the self. As Kochanska put it: “Children with a strong history of committed compliance with the parent are likely gradually to come to view themselves as embracing the parent’s values and rules. Such a moral self, in turn, comes to serve as the regulator of future moral conduct and, more generally, of early morality.”¹⁴⁸ This model would suggest that the source of wholehearted commitment to morality that is characteristic of Blasi’s moral personality might lie in the mutual, positive affective relationship with caregivers—assuming that Kochanska’s “committed compliance” is a developmental precursor to Blasi’s “wholehearted commitment.”

A recent longitudinal study by Kochanska and colleagues provides an empirical basis for linking the interplay of conscience development, moral self, and psychosocial competence over the course of the toddler years to early school age.¹⁴⁹ Two dimensions of conscience were assessed at 25, 38, and 52 months of age. One dimension was “out-of-sight” compliance, that is, the

extent to which toddlers internalized their mother and father’s rules when the child was left alone. The second dimension was empathic concern toward each parent, as assessed in a simulated distress paradigm. At 67 months the moral self was assessed using a puppet interview; and at 80 months parents and teachers rated the children on various assessments of psychosocial competence that tapped, for example, peer relations, school engagement, problem and prosocial behavior, oppositional or defiant behavior, the absence of guilt or empathy, and disregard for rules and standards.

Of particular interest was the puppet interview of the moral self. It works this way: Two puppets are anchored on opposite ends of 31 items. The items pertain to dimensions of early conscience (e.g., internalization of rules, empathy, and apology). Each item is presented with a brief scenario, with one puppet endorsing one option and the other puppet endorsing a contrary option. For example, in one scenario Puppet 1 would say: “When I break something, I try to hide it so no one finds out.” Puppet 2 would declare “When I break something, I tell someone right away.” Then the child is asked “What about you? Do you try to hide something that you broke or do you tell someone right away?”

The results showed that children who as toddlers and preschoolers had a strong history of internalized out-of-sight compliance with parents’ rules were also competent, engaged, and prosocial at early school age, with few antisocial behavioral problems. Similarly, toddlers and preschoolers with a strong history of empathic responding showed a robust profile of psychosocial competence at early school age. Moreover, children’s moral self was a strong predictor of future competent behavior as well. Children at 67 months who were “highly moral” were rated at 80 months to be prosocial, highly competent, and well-socialized. What’s more, the child’s moral self was shown to mediate the relationship between out-of-sight compliance with maternal rules and later psychological competence at 80 months.

Indeed, Kochanska et al. argued that the moral self is the mechanism that at least partly accounts for the relationship between early conscience and later evidence of psychosocial competence.¹⁵⁰ A number of possibilities are suggested: perhaps the moral self is motivated to avoid cognitive dissonance or is better able to anticipate guilty feelings; or perhaps the moral self exercises automatic regulation due to the high accessibility of moral schemas, an explanation that accords with social-cognitive approaches to the moral self.¹⁵¹

VI. Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter I made a case for understanding the dispositional properties of moral personality in terms of a social-cognitive theory of moral identity. I tried

to place moral self-identity into a historical context of moral developmental psychology and to show how it is connected to important philosophical reflections on what it means to be a person (Frankfurt) and a self (Taylor). This required unpacking Augusto Blasi's important contribution to moral identity theory. On his view moral identity reflects the importance of what we care about. A moral person is committed to second-order desires, engages in strong evaluation, and is more likely to follow through with moral action.

But I argued that the capacity for strong evaluation depends upon the accessibility of moral identity as a dimension of individual differences and the centrality of moral identity in working memory. Moral identity can be chronically accessible to guide moral behavior, but it can be activated or deactivated by situational press. Hence, a social-cognitive account of moral personality is not driven to solve the "situationism challenge" that appears to preoccupy empirical philosophers and moral trait theorists alike. It is not concerned to demonstrate the situational invariance of traits. It is not put out by evidence of situational variability in the display of virtue.

Instead, it seeks to understanding the social-cognitive mechanisms that lead to reliable predictions about whether, when, and how moral identifications matter most in the social contexts that partly define and confront us. A more interesting task is specifying the social-cognitive and contextual conditions that give rise to stability and change. There is a dispositional signature to moral identity, but it is located at the intersection of person x context interactions.

The social-cognitive moral identity research program has salutary features that speak to its progressive nature. It is theoretically integrative with other areas of psychological science. It rests on an impressive and growing empirical foundation. It justifies the original Blasian expectation that moral self-identity would be a robust predictor of moral behavior. Indeed, no other dispositional account of moral personality comes remotely close. It makes bold claims about the work of moral identity as a mediator and moderator, with ample and interesting empirical corroboration. It addresses deficiencies in Blasi's character-based conceptualization of moral identity, particularly with respect to the dynamic, heterogeneous, and situationally responsive nature of moral identity. It anticipates novel facts with respect to moral credentials, moral licensing, and moral cleansing. There is a plausible story about its social-cognitive development.

And it raises interesting philosophical questions. For example, how should we think about the dark side of moral identity, that is, its role in moral licensing and cleansing? I celebrated this linkage above as more proof that moral identity is a progressive research program insofar as it anticipates novel, interesting facts that would not otherwise have been discovered without it. But do we really want to say that someone with a strong moral identity

is virtuous *all the way down* if it gives license, from time to time, to unethical or self-serving conduct?¹⁵² If it lets us off the hook? For all of its explanatory power one might wonder if moral identity is a *philosophically* responsible empirical theory if it leaves room for self-exculpatory rationalization of unethical behavior.

This is an important question that cannot be adequately addressed here. It is possible, after all, that what is wanted by way of philosophically responsible empirical theory (virtues all the way down) is a useful philosophical fiction that does not accord with psychological realism. This aside, perhaps several distinctions will move the argument in the right direction.

Certainly moral credentials and moral cleansing illustrate just how crucial morality is to self-understanding and how strongly committed are individuals to protect moral self-identity. Selfhood and morality are interpenetrating notions, as we have seen. Yet it is important to distinguish the licensing effects of moral credentials from the restorative, compensatory work of moral cleansing. Credentials and cleansing both reflect the importance of morality to self-identity, to be sure, but in ways that have different implications for virtue.

For example, we would not think highly of someone who views morality as a performance, that is, as something to be exhibited or demonstrated as a credential, and then for the purpose of giving the self a license for immorality. This is incontinence, not virtue. On the other hand, the motivation to cleanse the self of iniquity by a renewed identification with morality is praiseworthy. It is the very nature of redemption and is compatible with realistic accounts of virtuous lives.

But social-cognitive theory is not helpless to understand this distinction. Indeed, the distinction between moral performance (credentialing) and moral improvement (cleansing) tracks the dual mindsets of a prominent social-cognitive theory of personality. In their landmark paper Dweck and Leggett argued that individuals' views about the self-concept coalesce around one of two theories: the *entity theory* views self-attributes (intelligence, moral character, self-esteem) as fixed, whereas the *incremental theory* views personality attributes as malleable and capable of improvement and growth.¹⁵³ Each theory leads to different goals. The entity theory encourages performance goals where the motivation is to gain positive judgments about one's attributes and avoid negative judgments. The incremental theory encourages learning and developmental goals. The goal is to increase one's social competence.

This framework has taken off to explain student motivation and achievement in school, but Dweck and Leggett argued that it has promise for understanding moral character as well.¹⁵⁴ They observed that "some people tend to engage in moral action in order to prove to themselves and others that they are moral (performance goals), whereas other people might tend to pursue courses

of action that would allow them to mastery a morally difficult situation according to some standard (learning goals)." On this reading I would suggest that there is both a fixed and incremental approach to moral self-identity and that moral identity mindsets encourage individuals to pursue either performance goals that encourage the demonstration of moral credentials or else learning or development goals that encourage behavior associated with moral cleansing.

This is speculative, of course, but linking the social-cognitive literatures of moral self-identity and moral mindsets should yield new lines of research that are both empirically productive and philosophically responsible. Indeed, how best to characterize the moral dimensions of personality will require extending a hand across the mending wall.

"Something there is that does not love a wall," the poet says, "that wants it down." It is "spring mending time" in moral psychology, and we are confident of good neighbors as we walk the common boundary between ethics and psychology.

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From a Baby Smiling

Reflections on Virtues in Development

ROBERT N. EMDE

This chapter shares my experiences in thinking about the development of virtues, reflecting on observations from my career as a developmental researcher and clinician. As a newcomer to this topic, I present some perspectives that supplement the valuable contributions of others represented in this volume (for example, in the chapters of Thompson, Narvaez, Carlo, and Snow). I begin with my entry points to thinking about the topic, followed by reflections generated from observations in infancy that include basic functions of moral development. This will lead to considerations about resources for virtues in the developmental process that are provided by our evolutionary biology. A conclusion of the chapter will reflect on pathways to virtues from infancy on, as well as challenges for research.

I. Choosing a Framework

My attention was drawn to thinking about virtues not too long ago when I was helping to set up and evaluate new programs in Early Head Start. In interviewing Latino immigrant parents in one program about what they wanted as outcomes for their children growing up, I became surprised. Considering the educational setting in which I was interviewing, what they emphasized more than learning or educational goals was that they wanted their children to grow up to be respectful. As they got older they wanted their children to be considerate of others and respectful of their parental values, views, and advice. Some added wishes for honesty, strength, and health. I was then struck with the fact that similar aspirations were expressed by other parents coming to Early Head Start, who, although all living in circumstances of urban poverty, came from

Developing the Virtues

Integrating Perspectives

EDITED BY JULIA ANNAS, DARCIA NARVAEZ
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NANCY E. SNOW

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