The Moral Self and Its Discontents

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Abstract

The common image of the moral agent is one who makes decisions on the basis of explicit calculation. According to the received view, a behavior has no particular moral status unless it is motivated by an explicit moral judgment. It is behavior beleaguered by the weight of moral duty. Similarly, one has a moral identity to the extent that the self is constructed with reference to explicit moral reasons. In these remarks I will contend that an uncritical acceptance of the received view has had three untoward effects on moral psychology: (1) It unacceptably narrows the range of behavior that can be the target of legitimate moral psychological inquiry. Decisions made outside of consciousness and actions taken without deliberation—in other words, most human behavior—are disqualified from moral appraisal. (2) It isolates moral psychology from relevant domains of psychological research. (3) It fails the test of "minimal psychological realism". Indeed, recent research in social cognition radically undermines the premise of the received view. Finally, contemporary models of moral selfhood and identity lack a developmental specification. I will chart an alternative social cognitive model that links moral identity to the chronic accessibility of schemes that have their developmental source in children's emerging capacity for event representation.

The common image of the moral agent is one who *makes decisions*. These moral decisions are the product of vast calculation. Principles are discerned, judgments are formed, rules of application are weighed. The requirements of duty, the probative force of outcomes and consequences, the adjudication of competing claims, are all fairly transparent to the rational, deliberative agent, who engages in extensive cognitive effort in order to resolve dilemmas, make choices, and justify actions. Indeed, the costly investment of cognitive resources into moral deliberation is thought to underlie the very notion of moral autonomy. Moral freedom in grounded in the rational capacity to discern options, make decisions, and enact intentions. We are not merely reactive to external contingencies; we are, indeed, liberated from "stimulus control" *because* of our ability to bring our behavior under the explicit guidance of rational deliberation.

This image of the moral agent has dominated psychological research on moral development for nearly five decades. Indeed, the cognitive developmental tradition assumes that the child is a "naïve philosopher" whose moral perspective becomes progressively transformed along a developmental path of increasing philosophical and psychological adequacy (Kohlberg, 1983; 1984). Moral development is discernable in the conscious deliberations and choices made by individuals as they wrestle with the moral quandaries of hypothetical dilemmas.   It is the quality of explicit judgments, the developmental sophistication of conscious reasoning, that has been the target of inquiry in the cognitive developmental tradition

Moreover, this tradition insists on the "principle of phenomenalism" to define the domain of inquiry. This principle asserts that the phenomenological perspective of the moral agent is crucial for determining the moral status of reasoning and behavior. That is, according to this view, a behavior has no particular moral status *unless it is motivated*

by an explicit moral judgment. Hence no matter how praiseworthy a commitment, or prosocial a line of action, no matter how heroic the display of virtue, none of these has any distinctly moral significance unless the agent is motivated by an explicit moral judgment. A moral behavior is something undertaken for moral reasons, known to the agent. A moral behavior is one that is motivated by an explicit recognition of the prescriptive force of moral rules. It is behavior beleaguered by the weight of moral duty. Consequently, the subjective intention of the rational moral agent is the object of inquiry in moral development research just because, in the absence of explicit judgments, in the absence of rational deliberation, there can be no distinctly *moral* phenomena in the first place. The moral status of an action can only be certified by indexing the explicit rationale invoked by the agent to justify or explain the action

Hence the assumption of phenomenalism insists that cognition, if it is to count as *moral* cognition, must be conscious, explicit, effortful. Behavior, if it is to count as moral behavior, must be intended in light of a moral reason.

One problem with this formulation is that much of our cognitive activity is not like this at all, but is instead characterized by processes that are tacit, implicit and automatic. Another problem is that controlled processes and effortful reasoning do not guide much of our behavior.

In my view an uncritical reliance on the principle of phenomenalism has had three untoward effects on moral psychology. First, the principle unacceptably narrows the range of behavior that can be the target of legitimate moral psychological inquiry. Decisions made outside of consciousness and actions taken without deliberation—in other words, most human behavior—is disqualified from analysis and explanation.

Second, the principle of phenomenalism isolates moral psychology from the theoretical and empirical literatures of other relevant domains of psychological research. It requires that the field of moral psychology ignore advances in a number of otherwise relevant psychological domains-- including cognition, social cognition and personality-- if this research reveals models of functioning at variance with the principle. Adhering to the principle leads of explanation about situations and phenomena that are rare, specialized and largely hypothetical. It ignores the commonplaces of everyday moral life, or else rules them out-of-bounds by fiat and by definitional preferences. This *a priori* constraint on legitimate lines of

inquiry cuts off moral psychology from strong integrative possibilities with these literatures, and instead encourages theoretical isolation, atrophy and irrelevance.

Third, the principle of phenomenalism seems at odds with contemporary understanding of human action held by many cognitive psychologists. For example, in a series of articles John Bargh presents compelling evidence that much of the activity of our daily lives is governed by cognitive processes that are preconscious and automatic (e.g., Bargh, 1989; 1990; 1996; 1997; Uleman & Bargh, 1989; Wyer, 1997). This literature would seem to radically undermine the psychological foundation of the "principle of phenomenalism" and pose a significant challenge to the traditions of developmental research that accept it as a premise, notably moral psychology. Bargh and Ferguson (2000, p. 926) noted, for example, that "higher mental processes that have traditionally served as quintessential examples of choice and free will --such as goal pursuit, judgment, and interpersonal behavior-- have been shown recently to occur in the absence of conscious choice or guidance." If automatic cognitive processes govern much of the behavior of everyday life, very little human behavior stems from deliberative or conscious thought and far less receives moral deliberation. Moral behavior becomes a rare, unusual occurrence, pushed to the margins of human activity. If moral conduct hinges on conscious, explicit deliberation, then much of human behavior simply does not qualify.

If it is true that much of our social cognitive functioning is implicit, tacit, or automatic, then the incidence of moral behavior will turn out to be rare and unusual in human affairs, if we are to believe the principle of phenomalism. Individuals who engage in morally relevant behavior are often inarticulate about their motivations, are unable to say what judgments may have accompanied an action. To first require an agent to form a judgment, to settle upon a motive, to construct moral meaning in order to designate morally relevant behavior as distinctly moral is to relegate vast areas of human life beyond the purview of moral evaluation. Much of human behavior will simply not qualify, given the automatic and tacit nature of social cognition.

Hence the assumption of phenomenalism has an unintended consequence. It leads to an attenuation of the moral domain. It significantly narrows the range of functioning that can be the target of legitimate moral psychological explanation. In the words of Iris Murdoch

(1992, p. 297, 303), it suggests that moral rationality and moral behavior are "an occasional part-time activity," some "specialized isolated moment appearing in a continuum of non-moral activity." It leaves the moral self, in other words, *with precious little to do*. But this attenuation results from adopting a certain philosophical position on the nature of moral judgment and action (and not from psychological considerations)[1]. It results from the fact that for many decades we have been pursuing a *moralized psychology* – a psychology of moral development whose premise is philosophical.

I should like to suggest instead that it is now time to jettison starting points that are motivated more by philosophical than by psychological considerations. Rather than a "moralized psychology" whose parameters and terms of reference are set by certain philosophical goals we opt instead for a "psychologized morality" that attempts to study moral functioning within the framework of contemporary psychological theories and methods. After all, literatures that are rich with data and insight about psychological functioning are not irrelevant for understanding moral functioning. Advances in cognitive science, learning, motivation and personality are not irrelevant for understanding moral rationality, moral socialization and the formation of moral identity.

Darcia Narvaez and I have been trying to articulate a social cognitive view of the moral personality or moral self that takes a psychological starting point. We borrow liberally from the social cognitive approach to personality that has emerged to challenge the more traditional view that personality is a collection of traits.
According to Cantor (1990), the trait approach represents the "having" side of personality; it construes personality in terms of trait possession; as the sum of traits that one has. In contrast, the social cognitive approach to personality represents the "doing" side of personality; it describes what people do when they construe the social landscape, how they transform and interpret it in accordance with social cognitive mechanisms. For Cantor (1990; Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987), the cognitive carriers of dispositions include such things as self-schemas, prototypes, scripts and episodes. Schemas, for example, "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'" (Cantor, 1990, p. 738).

Indeed, Cantor (1990) uses the notion of expertise to illustrate how schemas can maintain patterns of individual differences. If schemas are chronically accessible, for example, then they direct our attention selectively to certain features of our experience at the expense of others; it disposes one to select compatible or schema-relevant life tasks, goals or settings which, in turn, canalize and maintain dispositional tendencies; it encourages one to develop highly practiced behavioral routines in those areas demarcated by chronically accessible schemas, which provide "a ready, sometimes automatically available plan of action in such life contexts" (Cantor, 1990, p. 738). In other words, experts possess procedural knowledge that has a high degree of automaticity.

The critical variable is not trait possession but rather the accessibility of social cognitive units such as schemas, scripts, prototypes and episodes. The more frequently a construct is activated, or the more recently it is primed, the more accessible it should be for social information processing (Higgins, 1996, 1999). Frequently activated constructs should, over time, become chronically accessible, and, moreover, there should be individual differences in the accessibility of constructs just because the social experiences of individuals varies widely. Hence accessibility is a person variable and is properly considered a personality variable (Higgins, 1996).
Three additional points are crucial. First, chronically accessible constructs are at higher state of activation than are inaccessible constructs (Bargh & Pratto, 1986), and are produced so efficiently as to approach automaticity (Bargh, 1989). Second, available constructs can be made accessible by situational priming as well as by chronicity, and that the two sources of activation combine in an additive fashion to influence social information-processing (Bargh, Bond, Lombardi & Tota, 1986). Third. individual differences in construct accessibility emerge because of each person's unique social developmental history (Bargh, Lombardi & Higgins, 1988).

We think this perspective is a good way to conceptualize the moral personality (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004). The moral personality under this view, is to be understood in terms of the accessibility of moral schemas for social information-processing. A moral person, a person who has a moral character or identity, is one for whom moral constructs are chronically accessible, where construct accessibility and availability are dimensions of individual differences.

A social cognitive model has at least three additional advantages. First, it provides a explanation for the model of moral identity favored by

Blasi (1984), who argued that one has a moral identity just when moral categories are essential, central and important to one's self-understanding. One has a moral identity when the self is constructed on the basis of moral commitments. Under a social cognitive interpretation, however, we would say that moral categories that are essential, central and important for one's self-identity would also be ones that are chronically accessible for interpreting the social landscape. These categories would be on-line, vigilant, easily primed, easily activated, for discerning the meaning of events, for noticing the moral dimensions of experience and, once activated, to dispose one to interpret events in light of one's moral commitments.

Second, this model accounts for at least one characteristic of moral exemplars. As Colby and Damon (1992) have shown, individuals who display extraordinary moral commitment rarely report engaging in an extensive decision-making process. Rather, they "just knew" what was required of them, automatically as it were, without the experience of working through an elaborate decision-making calculus. This is also experienced by exemplars as a kind of moral clarity or a felt conviction that one's judgments or decisions are evidently appropriate, justified and true. 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 our social judgments

Finally, a social cognitive model of the moral personality can account for situational variability in the display of a virtue, and is compatible with the view that dispositional coherence is to be found at the intersection of person and contexts. The accessibility of social cognitive schemas underwrites not only the discriminative facility in the selection of situationally appropriate behavior, but also the automaticity of schema activation that contributes to the tacit, implicit qualities often associated with the "habits" of moral character.

One challenge for a social cognitive theory of moral character is to specify the developmental sources of moral chronicity (or of moral identity, for that matter, see Nucci, in press).We have attempted recently to spell this out with more specificity (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004). In our view moral personality development is built on the foundation of generalized event representations that characterize early sociopersonality development (Thompson, 1998). These representations have been called the "basic building blocks of cognitive development" (Nelson & Gruendel, 1981, p.

131). They are working models of how social routines unfold and of what one can expect of social experience. These prototypic knowledge structures are progressively elaborated in the 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 psychology is how these early social-cognitive units are transformed from episodic into autobiographical memory. Autobiographical memory is also a social construction elaborated by means of dialogue within a web of interlocution. Parental interrogatives ("What happened when you pushed your sister?" "Why did she cry?", "What should you do next?") help children organize events into personally relevant autobiographical memories which provide, as part of the self-narrative, action-guiding scripts ("I share with her" and "I say I'm sorry") that become frequently practiced, over-learned, routine, habitual and automatic. These interrogatorives might also include moral character attributions so that the ideal or ought self becomes part of the child's autobiographical narrative. 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 (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004).

Appendix

It is now clear that much of human behavior is governed by cognitive systems that are characterized by varying degrees of automaticity. Traditionally, automaticity is inferred if cognitive processes are engaged unintentionally, involuntarily, with little or no expenditure of attention or cognitive resources, without effort, and outside of conscious awareness. Automaticity is typically contrasted with controlled cognitive processes that are flexibly under intentional control and conscious awareness. Yet the distinction between automatic and controlled processing is not a rigid one, nor does the designation of automaticity require the co-occurrence of all of the traditional criteria. Indeed, Bargh (1989) argues that awareness, attention, intention and control are somewhat independent qualities that co-occur in different combinations, elicited under specific enabling circumstances. Moreover, the ascription of automaticity to behavior (e.g.,

walking, driving, reading) does not necessarily imply that the behavior is not intentional, or that it cannot be controlled or halted (Logan, 1989).

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