

Moral Personality: Themes, Questions, Futures

DARCIA NARVAEZ AND DANIEL K. LAPSLEY

In this final chapter we reflect on some of the themes that resonate throughout the volume, but also raise some enduring questions for the field of moral personality, and some possible future lines of research.

THEMES

A primary theme of the volume is that traditional ways of carving up the disciplines is no longer a productive way to investigate moral personality. There is something about the rhythm of science that seeks integrative frameworks, and there is now a palpable movement toward engaging broader perspectives that cross traditional disciplinary boundaries. The disjunction between trait dispositional and social-cognitive approaches to personality, for example, no longer seems forbidding. A second example is McAdams' new Big Five framework that was designed to provide a unifying framework to personality science, but ends up rich with implications for lifespan development research as well, as several chapters attest in the present volume. There is a convergence of meta-theoretical perspectives on person-context transactions that unify the work of personality, social, and developmental researchers. And within developmental science there is a blueprint for merging social and cognitive developmental research in a way that makes contact with the study of social cognition in adults. The study of moral personality, then, is a topic that is inherently interdisciplinary, much in the way that cognitive science necessarily brings together scholars from many fields of study.

A second theme is that the foundations of the moral self are laid early in development. By the second birthday, and certainly as toddlers, an increasing dispositional stability emerges that has significance for prosocial behavior and moral development. With this stability comes an increasing

appreciation of perspectives, an awareness of behavioral norms, a sense of obligation, duty, and conscience that imbue the personality with its moral qualities. Much of this was missed, or dismissed, when developmental science was preoccupied with reasoning and dilemma-solving. But developmental research across a wide front of topics illustrates just how richly moral is the fabric of early childhood.

The third theme is that the study of moral personality development requires a more expansive view of the moral domain. For example, the vast literatures on temperament, attachment, the development of self-regulation and of event representations – to name four examples – are now revealing how these acquisitions have implications for moral and prosocial functioning. Research on trait dispositions have charted long-term relationships with numerous outcome variables, but often those that reflect adaptation in the breach – with conduct problems or psychopathology, or with broad indices of adaptation, are only rarely linked with distinctly prosocial outcomes.

The fourth theme is that context and culture matter in any account of moral personality. The display of dispositional tendencies is moderated by environmental contexts, from childrearing practices to neighborhood effects to work setting demands. The dispositional view of traits as if-then contingencies is a useful heuristic for conceptualizing the dynamic transaction between personal and contextual variables, and calls as much attention to the structure of settings and situations for influencing moral behavior as to the structure of personality. What's more, the present volume highlights broader cultural factors, too, as crucial for understanding moral personalities. Moralities are part of cultures, and cultures provide different narrative options for making sense of our moral vision, and for framing our moral conversations.

QUESTIONS

Of course, a volume that is intended to serve as a seedbed of ideas for an emergent, interdisciplinary field of study cannot wrap things up too neatly. Progressive research programs anticipate novel facts, and generate new hypotheses and questions. And certainly the present volume raises questions. One question concerns just what neuroscience and evolutionary perspectives will tell us about moral personality. Neuroscience and evolutionary psychology are themselves “young and provisional” sciences, and much of the extant research has focused on localizing brain regions during moral decision-making tasks using exotic moral dilemmas. The chapters by Moll and his colleagues, and by Narvaez, point us in promising directions insofar as they alert the field to how deeply integrative are our cognitive

and emotional moral response systems, and how varied moral responses are linked to evolved structures of the brain.

A second question concerns how to think about the defining attributes of moral identity. Is moral identity a matter of the self-importance of moral commitments? Does it mean that morality is central, essential, and important to self-understanding? Or does it mean that such notions are chronically accessible? A related question concerns the role of self-consistency as a motivational force for moral action. Some theorists in the present volume endorse such a view, but others wonder if self-consistency is empirically credible or is strictly necessary. Several authors point out the shifting nature of moral identities in their studies. Others postulate multiple identities that vary by context.

This raises several questions. How inclusive is the notion of moral identity? Do only some people have moral identities, based on the centrality of moral concerns to the self? Exemplar research supports such a view when it finds differences in moral concerns between exemplars and controls. But the research on adult moral functioning in social psychology experiments is shaking up the standard account of moral identity. Although the standard account is deontological, the adult studies suggest that individuals are situational utilitarians, modifying their behavior according to a balance sheet or according to what is morally mandated by their convictions in the moment. These findings raise many questions: How stable is a moral identity? Does it shift, as some find, based on priming or other conditions? How many identities does a person have? Or, does moral identity involve a broader swath of what a good life entails, incorporating notions of purity or ingroup security? Does everyone have a moral identity, or only one that varies based on context or “ideo-affective posture”? (Tomkins, 1965).

Related to the question of defining features is the question of whether moral identity invariably cashes out in ways that “pay off” – that is, are adaptive, salutary, morally praiseworthy, and the like. Most researchers agree that a committed moral identity provides one a schematic way of appraising the interpersonal landscape. Yet we have seen evidence in this volume that morally committed ways of viewing the world can harden into ideology, be a double-edged sword, or be trumped by situational variables. That the work of moral identity interacts with situational variables is not itself a theoretical embarrassment of any kind. Indeed, it is expected, given the orienting frameworks noted earlier. Yet it does invite reflection as to when one should be credited with having a moral identity, in what areas of one’s life, and under what conditions.

A further question concerns whether it makes sense to study particular virtues in isolation. Kohlberg’s research team focused on justice as a kind of

master virtue, so there is certainly precedent for investigating how particular dispositions – gratitude, say, or altruism – play out in the moral life of persons. How particular virtues cohere within the structure of personality as a dimension of individual differences is an interesting empirical question, one that points up the fact that there could be many kinds and varieties of moral personality; that there are many virtues around which to organize dispositional tendencies; and that how these develop, cohere, and relate to the world suggests productive lines of research.

How much consciousness is required of a moral personality? Does moral identity entail an approach to the moral life that is reflective, effortful, and deliberative – as something consuming attentional resources? Or is there automaticity to the work of moral identity? Is it intuitive or pre-reflective in any way? The traditional view of moral identity, following foundational sources in ethical theory (e.g., Harry Frankfurt and Charles Taylor), hold out for reflectiveness as the defining hallmark of the mature moral person. Others are not so sure if this is strictly required. Perspectives guided by findings in the cognitive and social-cognitive literatures are open to dual processing models that allow for the possibility of intuitive, heuristic, automatic behavior, as well as the more deliberative kind. But the question of how much and what kind of cognitive resources are required for moral self-identity, character, and personality is one that is not going away any time soon.

Perhaps the most fundamental question begged by the entire volume, and one that will take some time to answer, is whether it is even sensible to talk about moral personality, or moral traits, or moral character, or moral self-identity. What does “moral” add to our understanding of psychological processes? Of decision making? Of personality structure? What does *moral* character add to our understanding of character? Are there traits, and then another class of things called *moral* traits? When is a personality a *moral* personality? If it is said that one has a moral identity when moral notions are central to one’s self-definition, is it clear just what the notion of centrality points to? Our hunch is that even deeply motivated moral action – or pervasively moral ways of being-in-the-world – is driven by clusters of dispositional tendencies that could just as well drive other ways of being-in-the-world. Questions of this sort will require robust collaboration with philosophers of moral psychology.

FUTURES

We close by considering some possible future lines of research for the field of moral personality. The juxtaposition of different research paradigms

often shakes out in many new research ideas. It is not always possible to see the future clearly, and it would be presumptuous to articulate a research agenda that is too detailed and too prescriptive. In our view, what is needed is theoretical and methodological pluralism. Still, the present volume suggests some fruitful new lines of research.

One suggestion is to attend to initial life conditions, developmental constraints, and opportunities as these are experienced in sensitive periods. A moral identity presumably has work to do in the way the personality is organized and functions. It is assumed to influence the negotiation and construction of experiences across the life course. Attachment and its neurobiological imprints appear to influence moral personality in terms of fostering agreeableness and conscience. Other elements of the environment of evolutionary adaptedness may also be relevant to cultivating moral personality. At the very least, there appear to be sensitive periods in development (e.g., first year of life for emotion regulation and motivation; first five years for social functioning; early adolescence for social functioning; late adolescence for executive functions). Conscience development is related to responsive parenting in the early years whereas community service during adolescence fosters moral identity and civic engagement in adolescence. Mapping the sensitive periods for different elements of the moral personality, and how these are influenced by contextual factors, may help guide family, school-based, and community interventions.

Erikson's lifespan theory of development proved useful in framing research on the role of moral identity and the life tasks of generativity in middle adulthood. Indeed, Pratt and his colleagues make the interesting point that perhaps generativity itself is a nascent developmental variable that has manifestations in earlier periods of the lifespan, and otherwise resonates throughout the lifespan much the way self-identity issues do. What then about other psychosocial tasks, such as trust, autonomy, and initiative? How are these tasks experienced across the lifespan, and how does their articulation influence one's moral orientation? For example, built from caregiver responsiveness, trust appears to have a strong influence on early conscience development, supporting compliance with adult directives and prosocial behavior in childhood. How does this extend across the lifespan? Similar research questions attend other psychosocial tasks.

There is one Eriksonian viewpoint that has never been tested. This concerns his claim that each successful resolution of developmental challenges in the psychosocial stage sequence entails the cultivation of a characteristic virtue. One does not have to buy the whole Eriksonian meta-theory in order to wonder if there is structure and sequence to the acquisition

of virtues; or if, and how, such developmentally crucial virtues can be assessed. Wedding positive psychology's emphasis on strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2003) with a developmental perspective generally seems highly promising.

In recent writings, William Damon (2008) has written on "youth purpose" as an organizing construct in the study of positive youth development. Youth purpose is understood as a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is meaningful to the self, and that leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond the self. The search for self-meaning that is also self-transcendent is a strongly ethical enterprise that goes to the heart of what it means to live well the life that is good for one to live. Indeed, for Aristotle, the highest of human purposes involves *eudaimonia*, where flourishing has a pronounced ethical dimension. How does purpose organize self-identity and the moral dimensions of personality? This invites broader investigations about how moral personality maps into the emerging field of positive youth development, positive psychology, and the nature of well-being in adulthood.

Personality research, and moral personality research more so, has hardly begun to examine the effects of mediated technology on personality development. Youth are spending an increasing amount of time interacting through technological (e.g., text messaging) and virtual means (e.g., Second Life), and not necessarily to their intellectual benefit (Bauerlein, 2008). How do these experiences, and the lack of the face-to-face experiences they replace, influence identity? We know that young people take up different identities online and in electronic role games. Are there measurable effects of these activities on moral identity?

Augusto Blasi's chapter advocates an expansion of the parameters for research into moral functioning to include the public sphere, more specifically, the challenges adults face in the workplace. He reflects on the narrowness of everyday adult moral functioning, which is typically focused on family and private issues, and less thoughtful about broader social issues. He urges researchers to broaden their views of moral functioning to emphasize the self's coordination of multiple elements critical for citizenship and adult responsibilities. Adults need skills of reflection; intuition will not do (and he has much to say against the "intuitions as normal" perspective; also see Narvaez, 2009). Examining the landscape of adult functioning and how to foster it is an area ripe for study.

Allied with Blasi's suggestion to examine mature moral functioning is a plea to expand the study of moral personality beyond moral exemplars in

highly restricted domains of social life (e.g., volunteer behaviour). What about “moral collapse”? What about moral functioning in the breach? Or research on the structure and malleability of vices? Moreover, it may be useful to study the elements of moral personality in such domains as moral sensitivity, focus, and action skills.

Although Casebeer (2005) and Churchland (1998) have argued that moral personality understood in terms of virtue ethics is the most neurobiologically plausible moral theory, none of our authors directly incorporated virtue theory into their work. Virtues are cultivated by particular life experiences. What are they? How do people transform themselves into virtuous agents? How do ordinary people become morally focused, if not moral, exemplars? Elsewhere, Bill Puka (2006 Symposium talk) suggested that the acquisition of virtues is a practical affair – they are “experiments in truth,” that can be scientifically studied, and for whose impediments interventions can be designed.

Progress on social phenomena will also require theoretical innovation in understanding the brain’s distinctly biological form of functioning, which is anchored by emotions, needs, drives, and the instinct for survival. As of yet, the basic neural principles governing the relation of these basic functions to planning, judgment, and moral decision making are barely understood. Moll et al. and Narvaez make suggestions for how to bridge the gaps between general biological aspects of human functioning and moral functioning. More recent research on the epigenome (environmental effects on gene expression) indicates that the environment plays a leading role in determining how genes function in physiology and personality. For example, during gestation the fetus interprets “environmental information to predict aspects of its future environment and thus resets its developmental trajectories to optimise its future performance ... in adult life” (Gluckman & Hanson, 2004, p. 23). No doubt there are social and morally relevant impacts to be examined.

Last but perhaps most important, the question of assessment, particularly developmental assessment, will play a crucial role in developing a field of moral personality. We generally lack well-attested assessments of many core constructs in the field. One reason that Kohlberg’s stage theory was so productive and so influential was because highly regarded assessments of moral reasoning were available to generate research. Nothing like that exists with respect to moral personality constructs, and nothing can stop the momentum of research more surely than the absence of adequate measurement strategies.

REFERENCES

- Bauerlein, M. (2008). *The Dumbest Generation: How the digital age stupefies young Americans and jeopardizes our future*. New York: Tarcher/Penguin.
- Blasi, A. (this volume). Moral reasoning and the moral functioning of mature adults. In D. Narvaez & D. K. Lapsley. (Eds.) *Personality, identity, and character explorations in moral psychology* (pp. xx–xx). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Casebeer (2005). *Natural ethical facts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Churchland, P. (1998). Toward a cognitive neurobiology of the emotions. *Topoi*, 17, 83–96.
- Damon, W. (2008) *The path to purpose: Helping our children find the calling in life*. New York: The Free Press.
- Gluckman, P. D., & Hanson, M. A. (2004). Living with the past: Evolution, development, and patterns of disease. *Science*, 305, 1733–1736.
- McAdams, D. (this volume). The moral personality. In D. Narvaez & D. K. Lapsley. (Eds.) *Personality, identity, and character explorations in moral psychology* (pp. xx–xx). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Moll, J., de Oliveira-Souza, R., & Zahn, R. (this volume). Neuroscience and morality: Moral judgments, sentiments and values. In D. Narvaez & D. K. Lapsley. (Eds.) *Personality, identity, and character explorations in moral psychology* (pp. xx–xx). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Narvaez, D. (this volume). Triune ethics theory and moral personality. In D. Narvaez & D. Lapsley (Eds.), *Personality, identity, and character explorations in moral psychology* (pp. xx–xx). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- (2009). The Fatal attraction of truthiness and the importance of mature moral functioning. Manuscript under review.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York, American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press.
- Tomkins, S. (1965). Affect and the psychology of knowledge. In S. S. Tomkins & C. E. Izard (Eds.), *Affect, cognition, and personality* (pp. 72–97). New York: Springer.