Moral Self-Identity as the Aim of Education

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I. Introduction

The ambitions that most parents have for their children naturally include the development of important moral dispositions. Most parents want to raise children to become persons of a certain kind, persons who possess traits that are desirable and praiseworthy, whose personalities are imbued with a strong ethical compass. In situations of radical choice we hope that our children do the right thing for the right reason, even when faced with strong inclinations to do otherwise. Moreover, other socialization agents and institutions share this goal. For example, the moral formation of children is one of the foundational goals of formal education (Dewey, 1909; Bryk, 1988; Goodlad, 1992; Goodman & Lesnick, 2001; McClellan, 1999; Strike, this volume) and there is increasing recognition that neighborhoods and communities play critical roles for inducting children into the moral and civic norms that govern human social life (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill & Gallay, 2007; Lies et al., this volume).

Yet how are we to understand the moral dimensions of personality? When our aspiration is to raise children of “a certain kind,” what does this mean? Historically, the work of developmental and educational scientists have coalesced around two options. One option draws upon Aristotelian resources to assert that moral formation is a matter of character development; it is a matter of developing those dispositions that allow one to live well the life that is good for one to live. We flourish as persons, in other words, when we are in trait possession of the virtues. A second option draws upon Kantian resources to assert that moral formation is a matter of cognitive development; it is a matter of developing sophisticated deliberative competence to resolve the dilemmatic features of our lives but in a way compatible with the “moral point of view.” Our behavior is distinctly moral, under this view, when it conforms to the duties required by the moral law, or, alternatively, when behavior is undertaken for explicit moral reasons.
The character and cognitive developmental options are associated with various educational strategies that are discussed in a number of chapters in this volume and elsewhere (e.g., Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006; Turriel, 2006). In this chapter I describe a third option that attempts to frame the moral qualities of persons in terms of the psychological literatures on selfhood and identity. These constructs have a long history in psychology, and are variously understood by different research paradigms (e.g., Harter, 2006; Leary & Tangney, 2003). Hence their application to the moral domain is by no means straightforward (Blasi, 2004; see Pease, 1970). Yet, for all the peril, these constructs also hold out considerable promise for understanding the dispositional and motivational bases of moral behavior (Bergman, 2004; Blasi, 2005; Hardy & Carlo, 2005). Moreover, an appeal to self and identity opens up the study of moral development and education to the theoretical and methodological resources of other domains of psychological science, thereby increasing the prospect of our improving the aim of moral education with powerful integrative frameworks.

In the next section I attempt to frame the contemporary appeal of moral self-identity by situating it within the problematic of the character and cognitive developmental alternatives noted earlier. As we will see neither alternative has much use for the language of selfhood or identity, at least in their traditional, unvarnished formulation, but that a number of theoretical and empirical advances have converged to raise its profile. Five theoretical approaches to moral self-identity will then be described, followed by an account of their educational implications. I will conclude with a survey of “doubts and futures”---conceptual doubts about the coherence of moral self-identity as a useful construct in moral psychology, and possible futures for a moral self-identity research program.

II. Situating Moral Self-Identity

The increasing prominence of moral self-identity in developmental psychology (e.g., Blasi, 1993; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004) is reflected also by recent trends in contemporary ethics that draw a close connection between personal and moral considerations (Flanagan & Rorty, 1990; Taylor, 1989). As Taylor (1989) put it, “being a self is inseparable from existing in a space of moral issues” (p. 112). Of course, the recent prominence of the moral self should not imply that it was ever completely absent from ethical theory (Bergman, 2005). The Aristotelian ethical tradition, for example, with its emphasis on virtues, is thought particular friendly to the moral dimensions of selfhood (Punzo, 1996). Moreover, Carr (2001) associates Kant’s moral theory with the view that moral agency is crucial to what it means to be a person. As Carr (2001) put it “although there are other senses in which human agents may be regarded as persons, the most significant sense in which they are persons is that in which they are moral agents” (p. 82). For example, while many strictly contingent facts about one can be open to normative assessment (e.g., competent teacher, good writer, loves Bob Dylan), it is moral integrity, it is one’s moral character, that is a necessary feature of the “real me.”

Yet ethical traditions differ on how tightly to bind the connection between personal and moral. For example, although Kant’s ethical philosophy links moral agency and personhood (Carr, 2001) and carves out a role for virtue (Louden, 1986), it is famously thin in its account of the role of the self or of personality in moral rationality. For Kant, the moral self is a rationally autonomous moral agent, but one not conditioned by empirical realities such as sense experience, bodily desires and passions. The moral self is a “noumenal” agent not bound by causal necessity. It is the noumenal agent that is capable of rational willing. The noumenal moral agent can will purely, in complete freedom of the contaminating influence of passion and the determinisms of sensible experience. Indeed, bodily desires---the passions, inclinations, dispositions of our impure wills---exert a force contrary to reason. I will revisit this notion a bit later.

Hence, for the Kantian, embodiment is a pressing moral problem (Johnson, 1993). To get from the embodied, phenomenal agent bound by empirical characteristics, to the noumenal agent who is not, one must abstract from our phenomenal character everything that differentiates us from one another in the world of experience (Wolff, 1977). The noumenal self abstracts everything that is particular to us and therefore inessential to our shared essences as rational creatures (Stout, 1981). As MacIntyre (1984) put it, “To be a [Kantian] moral agent is…precisely to stand back from any and every situation in which one is involved, from any and every characteristic that one may possess, and to pass judgment on it from a
purely universal and abstract point of view that is totally detached from all social particularity” (p. 31). The Kantian moral agent, in other words, would not much care whether the self is a competent teacher, a good writer, or a Bob Dylan fan!

Much thicker conceptions of moral personhood are proposed in more recent ethical theory (Sandel, 1982; Taylor, 1989; Williams, 1973). These conceptions weave personal identity into the very fabric of moral agency, and serve as orienting frameworks for recent psychological accounts of moral self-identity. But something like the Kantian option was embraced by the cognitive developmental tradition that dominated the study of moral rationality for almost two generations of researchers. The most prominent example was, of course, Kohlberg’s moral stage theory (Kohlberg, 1969; Lapsley, 2006).

Kohlberg’s Paradigm

Kohlberg’s research program attempted to show that moral reasoning undergoes qualitatively distinct transformations that coalesce into six developmental stages. The trajectory of moral development aims for the final stage that describes a perfected mode of socio-moral operations. These operations make possible a deep appreciation of the moral point of view, one that seeks consensus, decries ethical relativism, and accedes to the duties and obligations required by universal moral imperatives. Yet Kohlberg’s research program did not leave much room for reflection on how moral cognition intersects with personological processes, for an important paradigmatic reason (there were strategic reasons, too, see Lapsley, 2006).

The paradigmatic reason can be traced to the way that stages are understood in the Piagetian cognitive developmental tradition. For Piaget, stages are descriptive taxonomic categories that classify formal “morphological” properties of children’s thinking on an epistemic level. Much the way a biologist might classify various species of mollusks on the basis of their structural characteristics, so too are forms of thought differentiated on the basis of structural properties. The resulting taxonomy is a stage sequence that describes species of knowledge, varieties and kinds of mental operations, and not different kinds of persons (Chapman, 1988).

When Kohlberg appropriated the Piagetian paradigm to frame moral development he well understood the taxonomic implications of the stage concept. Stages describe variations in the formal structural properties of sociomoral reflection, and not individual differences among persons. Moral stages are not, after all, “boxes for classifying and evaluating persons” (Colby, Kohlberg, Gibbs & Lieberman, 1983, p.11). Moral stages permit no aretaic judgment about moral competence, make no evaluative claim about character, say nothing about virtue, are silent about the moral features of personality and selfhood. Instead, the moral developmental stages, like Piaget’s stages, describe forms of thought organization of an ideal rational moral agent, an epistemic subject, and therefore cannot be “reflections upon the self” (Kohlberg, Levine & Hewer, 1983, p. 36). There can be no reason to wonder, then, given these paradigm commitments, just how personological issues, or notions of selfhood and identity, could matter to an epistemic subject or to a rational moral agent (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004).

Yet Kohlberg’s moral stage theory could not do without a self construct for long. Kohlberg appealed to the self to provide a motivational linkage between moral judgment and moral action. Kohlberg argued that one is motivated to perform a moral action when one perceives that the self is responsible for enacting the moral law. Hence judgments of self-responsibility play a motivational role in Kohlberg’s moral stage theory, but such judgments are a developmental achievement as well. Judgments of self-responsibility are more likely, for example, at higher stages of moral development. At the highest stages one has a better appreciation that moral principles make prescriptive claims upon the self; that moral principles oblige the self to enact what duty requires. For Kohlberg, then, it is the clear grasp of prescriptivity that launches the responsible self into action.

Kohlberg’s notion of the responsible self was largely informed by Blasi’s (1983) “self model” of moral action, although there is a subtle but important difference between the two positions. For Blasi, moral action does not follow directly from understanding the prescriptive quality of a deontic judgment, as it does for Kohlberg. Instead, after one makes a moral judgment one filters this judgment through a second set of calculations that
speaks to the issue of self-responsibility. These calculations might include whether taking a certain action is so required by one’s self-understanding, is so foundational to one’s self-identity and to the sort of person one claims oneself to be, that failure to act is to betray something fundamental about one’s very identity as a person. Blasi (2004) suggests that the motivation for moral action does not spring directly from a cognition (Blasi, 2004), but rather from a deeply felt sense of fidelity to oneself in action. It springs from a moral identity that is deeply rooted in moral commitments—commitments so deeply rooted, in fact, that to betray them is to betray the self.

This is not quite the same as Kohlberg’s view of the responsible self (Lapsley, 1996). For Kohlberg, the moral motivation to act is derived from one’s understanding of the prescriptive consequences of the moral law. Moral principles are automotivating for the responsible self who understands them. Under this condition, not to act is to betray a principle. For Blasi, moral motivation is a consequence of one’s moral identity, and not to act is to betray the self. Perhaps Kohlberg was unwilling to implicate the self more directly in moral deliberation lest it open the door to aretaic evaluation of persons, a prospect that he assiduously kept out of his moral stage theory.

Moral stage theory had recourse to the “responsible self,” then, as a way of bridging the gap between moral thought and action; between knowing the right thing to do and doing it. Blasi’s “self model” has been particularly influential (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004). Indeed, his account of the self-as-agent, whose identity is constructed by reference to moral reasons, is at the core of many contemporary accounts of moral identity, as we will see.

III. Theories of Self-Identity.

Orienting Frameworks

There is strong thematic affinity between prominent theories of moral self-identity in psychology and certain influential strands of contemporary ethics. The bridging concept appears to be Harry Frankfurt’s (1971) account of how the will is structured by means of second-order desires. Certainly we have motives and desires that structure our wants and impel action. A first-order desire is the desire for anything other than wanting certain desires. But we are capable also of second-order desires, that is, we have the self-reflective capacity to reflect upon our desires and motives, to form judgments and desires with respect to them. A second-order desire is the case of wanting to have certain desires, or alternatively, of wanting certain desires to be one’s will, or what Frankfurt (1971) calls second-order volitions. For example, we might want to have certain desires (e.g., to exhibit more charity, resist smoking, reduce carbon emissions), but not necessarily that such desires be effective, that is, be part of our will. After all, one’s desire to live charitably, to give up addictions, or be environmentally responsible could well clash with prudential judgments about the cost of such exertions; or simply be trumped by the lure of competing desires.

However, when we wish our desires to effectively move us “all the way to action” (Frankfurt, 1971, p.8), that is, to be willed, to that extent do we have second-order volitions. Moreover, in Frankfurt’s (1971) view, individuals who have second-order volitions are persons; those who do not are wantons. A person cares about the sort of desires, characteristics and motives one has, and wants effectively to instantiate these in one’s life. A wanton is beset by first-order desires that are ungoverned by second-order volitions. A wanton does not care about the desirability of his desires; does not care about his will. As Frankfurt (1971) put it, “Not only does he pursue whatever course of action he is most strongly inclined to pursue, but he does not care which of his inclinations is the strongest” (p. 11).

Frankfurt’s (1971) distinction between first- and second-order desires influenced important theories of moral self-identity in both philosophy (Taylor, 1989) and psychology (e.g., Blasi, 2004, 2005). For example, according to Taylor (1989), an individual is a person to the extent that one engages in strong evaluation. Strong evaluators are those who make ethical assessments of their first-order desires. Strong evaluators make discriminations about what is worthy or unworthy, about what is 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. Indeed, our identity is defined by strong evaluation; it is defined
by reference to things that have significance for us. “To know who I am,” Taylor (1989) writes, “is a species of knowing where I stand (p. 27). 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” (p. 27)

Taylor (1989) assumes that it is a basic aspiration of human beings to be connected to something of crucial importance; to something considered good, worthy and of fundamental value; and that this orientation to the good “is essential to being a functional moral agent” (p. 42).

Blasi’s Moral Personality

Moral Identity. The notion of second order desires and of the identity-defining commitments of strong evaluation are evident in Blasi’s (1984, 1985) early writings on moral self-identity. His work bridges two somewhat disjunctive positions in moral psychology, positions that seem to reflect the dual options of a deeply entrenched “folk theory” of Western morality (see, e.g., Johnson, 1993). The Western folk theory of morality assumes that the will is beset by opposing forces, one of reason, and one of passion; and that the two forces are slugging it out for the control of the will. Kant (1785/1988) assumed, for example, that of the two natures, rationality is what is essential, higher and worthy of us, while passion and our bodily nature was lower and unworthy, the source of compromise, backsliding and perdition. Indeed, for Kant (1785/1988), our lowly bodily nature tended “...to argue against these strict laws of duty and to question their validity, or at least their purity and strictness; and, if possible, to make them more accordant with our wishes and inclinations, that is to say, to corrupt them at their very source, and entirely to destroy their worth” (p. 30). Not for nothing, then, did Kant locate the moral self in a transcendental metaphysical realm safely removed from the corrupting contingencies of bodily passions, desires and motives.

The difficulty for the moral theorist is to retain the traditional emphasis on moral rationality while constructing a moral psychology that is applicable to creatures like us, that is, to creatures who are thickly-constituted persons and not ghostly noumenal ciphers. The danger is twofold, as least from the perspective of our moral folk theory: If one links moral functioning to our deeper human nature--- to personality, to the self and its desires, passions and inclinations, then one risks divorcing morality from its most prized possession, which is rationality. But if one emphasizes reason and judgment as the sole moral motives, and casts into darkness those features close to our bodily nature, then one risks divorcing morality from the person. The trick is to ground moral psychology on a realistic conception of the person but in such a way that the rational character of morality is not lost.

Blasi’s (1984) solution is instructive. The construction of self-identity is done on the basis of moral commitments. In this case one can speak of a “moral personality.” For these individuals moral notions are central, essential, and important to self-understanding. Moral commitments cut deeply to the core of what and who they are as persons. But not everyone constructs the self by reference to moral categories. For some individuals moral considerations do not 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”).

Hence moral identity is a dimension of individual differences, which is to say, it is a way of talking about personality. One has a moral identity to the extent that moral notions, such as being good, being just, compassionate or fair, is judged to be central, essential and important to one’s self-understanding. One has a moral identity when one strives to keep faith with identity-defining moral commitments; and when moral claims stake out the very terms of reference for the sort of person one claims to be.

Blasi’s (1984) account of moral identity is not far from his Self Model of moral action. For example, if moral considerations are crucial
to the essential self, then self-integrity will hinge on whether one is self-
consistent in action. And failing to act in a way that is self-consistent with
what is central, essential and important to one’s moral identity is to risk
self-betrayal. In more recent writings Blasi has reflected on how and why
people come to care about the self and its projects and desires (Blasi, 2004).
He has also proposed a psychological account of moral character, and
outlined some important developmental considerations (Blasi, 2005).

approaches that view the self exclusively in terms of cognitive constructs—
as schemas, representations, concepts, knowledge. This orientation misses
something fundamental about human experience, which is the fact that we
are not neutral with respect to the self; we care about the sort of person we
are, and we take steps to manage and control our behavior, motives,
characteristics and desires accordingly. Moreover, we make distinctions
about what is core and fundamental to our identity and what is peripheral
and optional. We are motivated to protect this essential self from corruption,
and to promote its flourishing by the concrete choices of our lived
experience (Blasi & Glodis, 1995). These are activities of an intentional
agent who presses on for self-change and self-control, yet such intentional
agency is not captured by cognitive literatures that understand the self
simply as a species of representational knowledge. “The problem is
especially serious,” Blasi (2004) writes, “when one conceptualizes the
construction of self-representation, as is frequently done, as a result of non-
intentional, more or less automatic, frequently non-conscious information
processing operations” (p. 7, cf. Hassin, Uleman & Bargh, 2005; Narvaez &
Lapsley, 2005).

What is missing from cognitivist accounts is the sort of self-
experience that is conscious but nonrepresentational, such as the experience
of intentional action. Within intentional action the self is experienced
immediately in terms of its agency (the self is the source of action and
controls it) and its sense of mineness (the actions belong to the self). In
Blasi’s (2004) view, the sense of agency and ownership are real facts about
the subjective self, but they are not cognitive representations. They emerge
as a consequence of self-mastery and self-appropriation. Self-mastery is
the conscious, intentional process of gradually taking ownership
(“colonizing”) of various aspects of the self, including one’s emotions,
impulses and dispositions. An emergent, growing sense of self-mastery has
both objective and subjective consequences. On the objective side it yields
greater capacity for emotional and behavioral self-regulation. On the
subjective side, self-mastery extends one’s agentic reach which, in turn,
increases the sense of being in charge, of being capable and responsible, a
master of one’s domain.

Similar to self-mastery is the process of self-appropriation, which is
the “taking over” of different aspect of the self as one’s own property, but
integrating it within the self. Self-appropriation is a conscious selection
among different aspects of the self, but it is also a stance of welcoming (or
rejecting) these contents as a basis for identification. It is as if the person
said, “I know that I am all the things that I realize are true of me, but I want
only some of them to be really me” (Blasi, 2004, p. 14).

Of course, it is easy to see, in Blasi’s (2004) account of self-
appropriation, the affinity with Frankfurt’s (1971) notion of second-order
volitions; and of Taylor’s (1989) strong evaluation. Blasi (2005) recently
formulated a psychological account of moral character that appropriates
the language of “will” and other resources of Frankfurt’s (1971) seminal paper,
but which also proposes developmental steps in the child’s acquisition of
will.

Moral Character. One’s moral character presumably is comprised
of virtues. But it is useful, on Blasi’s (2005) view, to distinguish higher-
and lower-order virtues. Lower-order virtues are the many specific
predispositions that show up in lists of valued traits favored by character
educators including, for example, empathy, compassion, fairness, honesty,
generosity, kindness, diligence, and so on. Typically these lists describe
predispositions to respond in certain ways in highly specific situations. It is
easy to generate these “bags of virtue” (as Kohlberg derisively called them).
Indeed, as Blasi (2005) put it, “…one immediately observes that the lists
frequently differ from each other, are invariably long, and can be easily
extended, and are largely unsystematic” (p. 70). In contrast, higher-order
traits have greater generality and quite possibly apply across many
situations.
Two clusters of higher-order traits are distinguished. Blasi (2005) calls one cluster “willpower” (or, alternatively, self-control). Willpower as self-control is a toolbox of skills that permit self-regulation in problem-solving. Breaking down problems, goal-setting, focusing attention, avoiding distractions, resisting temptation, staying on task, persevering with determination and self-discipline—these are the skills of willpower. The second cluster of higher-order traits are organized around the notion of “integrity,” which refers to internal self-consistency. Being a person of one’s word, being transparent to oneself, being responsible, self-accountable, sincere, resistant to self-deception—these are the dispositions of integrity. Integrity is felt as responsibility when we constrain the self with intentional acts of self control in the pursuit of our moral aims. Integrity is felt as identity when we imbue the construction of self-meaning 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. It is rather like Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms: “Here I stand; I can do no other.”

This suggests that self-control and integrity are morally neutral but take on significance for moral character only when they are attached to moral desires. Our self-control and integrity are moralized by our desire to keep faith with morality. Here Blasi (2005) appeals to Frankfurt’s (1971) notion of effective will and second-order volitions noted earlier. To want to have certain moral desires (“second-order desires”), and to have these desires effectively willed for the self (“second-order volitions”), is the hallmark of moral character. Moral character describes persons but not wantons. But not all persons possess moral character either, unless they will moral desires as second-order volitions.

Development of the Moral Will. Blasi (2005) proposes seven steps in the development of the moral will. At step 1, the child experiences desires, some of which conflict, but the child is unable to distance the self from them or to choose among them. There is intentional action with respect to desires but there is neither volition nor self-mastery. As step 2, second-order desires are now possible to the extent that the child desires to repeat a certain experience of desire satisfaction. A volitional stance is taken towards desires in the sense that they are appropriated and brought under agentic control. The appropriation of a larger number of desires across a wider range of contexts is the hallmark of step 3. At step 4, actions and desires are grouped into categories and these are the object of volitional appropriation. Some undifferentiated and local moral desires might be present, but moral volitions are rare. At step 5 the various categories are subjected to valuation—some are good, beautiful, moral, and so on. But the category of morality is just one of many of things to value. No priority is accorded moral values over other values. Moral volitions are in competition with other volitions.

The distinctly moral will comes into sharper focus at steps 6 and 7. Step 6 points to two kinds of individuals. One kind desires certain moral desires to prevail when in conflict with other, rejected desires; and attempts to organize aspects of his or her life in accordance with them. Such moral desires are designated “virtues.” A second kind of individual links several of these virtues for the purpose of regulating wider areas of one’s life. Such a person is said to have “moral character.” The general concern, however, is with ridding rejected desires from one’s life. Absent is a notion of “wholeheartedness,” ---a notion also derived from Frankfurt (1988)--by which Blasi (2005) means that “a general moral desire become the basic concerns around which the will is structured” (p. 82). Wholehearted commitment to a moral desire, to the moral good, becomes an aspect of identity to the extent that not to act in accordance with the moral will is unthinkable. This is the stance of some individuals at Step 7.

Summary. Blasi’s writings on moral identity, personality and character established the terms of reference for a renewed examination of self and identity in the moral domain. His eloquent, meditative defense of the subjective self-as-agent in psychological science, his insistence on the rational, intentional nature of distinctly moral functioning, and his integration of self and identity with moral rationality and responsibility is a singular, influential achievement. Moreover, Blasi has returned long-forgotten concepts to the vocabulary of modern psychology, including desire, will, and volition; and added new concepts, such as self-appropriation and wholeheartedness. Although the most searching of his theoretical claims have yet to be translated into sustained empirical
research, there are lines of research that do encourage the general thrust of his work.

For example, moral identity is used to explain the motivation of individuals who sheltered Jews during the Nazi Holocaust (Monroe, 2003, 2001, 1994). 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 (Colby & Damon, 1992). 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 (Hart & Fegley, 1995; Reimer, 2003). Moral exemplars show more progress in adult identity development (Matsuba & Walker, 2004), and report self-conceptions that are replete with agentic themes, ideological depth and complexity (Matsuba & Walker, 2005). Moreover, identity integration and moral reasoning appear to be strongly correlated constructs (Maclean, Walker & Matsuba, 2004).

There are, of course, other approaches to moral self-identity. Indeed, the moral exemplar studies trade mostly on Blasi’s insight that a self constructed on moral ideals will show a distinctive behavioral profile. Although there is often broad compatibility with Blasi’s framework, alternative approaches to moral identity have starting points other than the subjective self-as-agent, and invoke processes that are more social-cognitive (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004b) personological (Walker, 1999; Walker & Hennig, 2004, 1998), communitarian (Power, 2004; this volume) and contextual (Hart, 2005; Hart, Atkins & Ford, 1998). A brief summary of these approaches is in order.

Alternative Approaches to Moral Identity

Moral Self in Community. Power (2004) extends Blasi’s perspective on the self to include a social dimension that takes the form of a moral or just community. The community dimension is critical, in Power’s (2004) view, insofar as “The self does not experience a sense of obligation or responsibility to act in isolation but with others within a cultural setting” (p. 52). One’s sense of identification with the group and its communal norms will generate a “moral atmosphere” that either conduces to moral formation or undermines it. Hence moral self-identity is a matter of group identification and shared commitment to its value-laden norms. The moral self identifies with the community by speaking on behalf of its shared norms and by taking on its obligations as binding on the self.

The transformation of classrooms and schools into just communities is an important educational strategy derived from the Kohlberg tradition (Power, this volume; Power, Higgins & Kohlberg, 1989). In a just community there is a commitment to participatory democracy but in the service of becoming a moral community. Members of a community—a classroom or school—commit to a common life that is regulated by norms that reflect moral ideals. These shared norms emerge as a product of democratic deliberation in community meetings. Here the benefits and burdens of shared lived experience are sorted out in a way that encourages group solidarity and identification. But group identification is not simply awareness that one is a member of a group, but rather that one is responsible for the group. The responsible self is a communal self that takes on obligations and duties as result of shared commitment to group norms.

Power (2004) uses Blasi’s (1988) account of identity types (identity observed, identity managed, identity constructed) as a template for understanding how a person might identify with a community by speaking on behalf of its norms. In an early phase, one simply acknowledges that one is a member of a group and is bound thereby to group norms (identity observed). Then, one speaks up more actively in defense of a group norm, and in urging the community to abide by its commitments (identity managed). Finally, one takes “legislative responsibility for constructing group norms” (p. 55; identity constructed). Power (2004) argues that the democratic process challenges members to “appropriate” community group membership into one’s personal identity. He writes:

“This appropriation is rational and critical and is not a passive internalization of group norms and values. Moreover, the
appropriation of membership in the community is to be based on the ideals of the community. In this sense the identification with the community not only allows for but encourages a critical stance toward its practices and commitment to change it” (p. 55)

The power of community involvement was demonstrated in a recent longitudinal study by Pratt and his colleagues (Pratt, Hunsberger, Pancer & Alisat, 2003). They constructed a moral self-ideal index that was based on participants’ endorsement of a set of six personal qualities (trustworthy, honest, fair, just, care, shows integrity, good citizen). At age 19, participants who endorsed a high moral self-ideal were also more likely to endorse the “self-transcendent” values of “universalism” and “benevolence.” Moreover, endorsement of each of the six moral qualities predicted an index of involvement in community activities.

Yet longitudinal analysis revealed that is was the temporal precedence of community involvement that led to subsequent endorsement of a moral self-ideal rather than the other way round. Moral self-ideal did not lead to community engagement but was its result. Moral self-ideal is a precipitate of good works and not its cause. If true this suggests that the best way to influence attitudes and values is to change behavior---in this case in the direction of greater community involvement (Pancer & Pratt, 1999). As Pratt et al. (2003) put it, “community involvement by adolescents leads to the development of some sort of sense of identity that is characterized by a greater prominence of moral, prosocial values” (p. 579).

A “Systems” Model. According to Hart (2005) identity is a crucial construct for at least two reasons. First, it helps us understand not only moral exemplars, but also instances of moral calamity, such as the Rwandan genocide that saw identity used as a lever for the destruction of Tutsis by Hutus (see also, Moshman, 2004). Second, it is a bridge construct between philosophical conceptions of the moral life and certain empirical findings of psychological research. For example, it is a commonplace in ethical theory to assert that moral freedom is grounded by our rational capacity to discern options, make decisions, and justify actions. On this account a behavior has no particular moral status unless it is motivated by an explicit moral judgment, one that is reached by means of an effortful, deliberative decision-making calculus.

Yet this image of moral agency collides with empirical research that shows that much of human decision-making is not like this at all; and that, indeed, much social behavior is under “nonconscious control” (Bargh, 2005). Hart (2005) asserts that moral psychology cannot evade findings like these, yet the deliberative quality of moral life also cannot be dispensed with. In his view the identity construct is one “…in which occasional conscious moral deliberations can be integrated with action plans, emotions and the structures of life” (Hart, 2005, p. 172.), which I take to mean are largely outside of consciousness.

According to Hart (2005), identity includes the ability to take oneself as an object of reflection, and to make an emotional investment in some aspects of the self. Identity is also the felt experience of continuity and sameness over time and place; and a sense of integration of self attributes. Identity requires the participation of others. It is forged in the heat of relational commitments, within webs of interlocution (Taylor, 1989), where social expectations influence which aspects of the self become important, essential and central to one’s identity. Finally, identity is a moment of strong evaluation (Taylor, 1989) that helps us discern answers to the traditional questions of ethics (“What should I do?” “What should of person should I become?”).

But Hart’s model is distinctive for its account of the factors that influence moral identity formation. Five factors are noted, arrayed into two columns of influence. The first column is composed of 1) enduring dispositional and 2) social (including family, culture, social class) characteristics that change slowly and are probably beyond the volitional control of the developing child. As Hart (2005, p. 179) put it, “Enduring personality characteristics, one’s family, one’s culture and location in a social structure, all shape moral life.” But these things are beyond the control of the child. Children do not select their personality traits; they do not select their home environments or neighborhood, though these settings will influence the contour of their moral formation. As a result, there is a certain moral luck (Nagel, 1979; Williams, 1981) involved in the way one’s
moral life goes, and a certain fragility of goodness (Nussbaum, 1986), too, depending on the favorability of the one’s ecological circumstances—including the goodness of fit between one’s enduring personality dispositions and the contextual settings of development.

The second column of influence includes 3) moral judgment and attitudes, 4) the sense of self (including commitment to ideals) and 5) opportunities for moral action. These factors are closer to the volitional control of the agent, and introduce more malleability and plasticity in moral identity formation. Moreover, they are thought to mediate the link between the first column (personality and social) and moral identity formation and other adaptive outcomes.

Hart and his colleagues have reported a number of studies that document key features of the model. One study (Hart, Atkins & Fegley, 2003) showed that moral identity (as reflected in voluntary community activity) has deep roots in childhood personality. In this study adolescents whose personality profile was judged “resilient” as children were more likely to be engaged in voluntary community than were teens who had undercontrolled or overcontrolled personality types as children. Social structure also influences children and adolescent’s voluntary community service. For example, neighborhoods characterized by poverty and child-saturated environments (a large proportion of the population composed of children and adolescents) are associated with depressed levels of volunteering (Hart, Atkins, Markey & Youniss, 2004).

Yet social opportunities are associated with increased youth participation in community service (Hart, this volume). In a recent study social opportunities to interact frequently with others in the community, perhaps through social institutional structures (church, community meetings), along with a “helping identity,” predicted voluntary community service in a nationally representative sample of adults (Matsuba, Hart & Atkins, 2007). Indeed, attachment to institutional groups seems to be a powerful way of facilitating youth involvement in community service (Hart, Atkins & Ford, 1998), particularly attachment to school (Atkins, Hart & Donnelly, 2004).

Hart’s (2005) model is the closest thing we have to a developmental systems perspective on moral identity formation; and one implication of an ecological systems perspective is the expectation of relative plasticity in development (Lerner, 2006). Not surprisingly, then, Hart’s model suggests that there is plasticity in moral identity development. Moral identity is open to revision across the lifecourse, particularly when one is given opportunities for moral action. This underscores the importance of providing youth with opportunities for service learning and community service (Hart, this volume).

Self-Importance of Moral Identity. Aquino and Reed’s (2002) account of moral identity shares some features in common with Blasi’s model. They assume, for example, that moral identity is a dimension of individual differences. Moral identity may be just one of several social identities that one might value, and there are individual differences in the centrality of morality in people’s self-definition. Moreover, they assume that moral identity is a key mechanism by which moral judgments and ideals are translated into action.

But Aquino and Reed (2002; Aquino, Reed, Thau & Freeman, 2007) also diverge from Blasi’s model in significant ways. For one thing, they avail themselves of the theoretical resources (and experimental methodologies) of social cognitive approaches to personality, an option that Blasi disfavors. Social cognitive theory assumes, for example, that the activation of mental representations of the self is critical for social information-processing. Hence, they define moral identity in terms of the availability and accessibility of moral schemes (following Lapsley and Lasky, 2002). On this view a person with a moral identity is one for whom moral schemas are chronically accessible, readily primed and easily activated for appraising the social landscape (Aquino et al., 2007).

Aquino and Reed (2002) also adopt a trait-specific approach to moral identity. They define moral identity as a self-conception that is organized around specific moral traits (e.g., caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, kind). These traits then serve as “salience induction stimuli” (in the manner of spreading activation effects) to activate a person’s moral identity when rating the self-importance
of these traits on a moral identity instrument. Factor analysis of this instrument revealed two factors: a Symbolization factor (the degree to which the traits are reflected in one’s public actions); and an Internalization factor (the degree to which these moral traits are central to one’s self-concept). In some studies these nine traits are used in an experimental manipulation to prime the accessibility of moral identity.

Research in this paradigm has yielded highly interesting results. For example, Aquino and Reed (2002) showed that both dimensions were significant predictors of spontaneous moral self-concept and self-reported volunteering, but that internalization showed the stronger relation to actual donating behavior and moral reasoning. In subsequent research individuals with a strong internalized moral identity reported a stronger moral obligation to help and share resources with outgroups; to perceive the worthiness of coming to their aid; and to prefer outgroups in actual donating behavior (Reed & Aquino, 2003). Similarly, Reed, Aquino and Levy (2007) showed that individuals for whom moral identity is very important prefer to donate their personal time for charitable causes rather than donate money. They also showed that while individuals with high organizational status may prefer to donate money to charity than time, this tendency was considerably weaker among individuals with strongly-important moral identity.

Finally, research shows that moral identity appears to neutralize the effectiveness of moral disengagement strategies (mechanisms that allow us to support or perpetrate doing harm to others while protecting our self-image and self-esteem). When the moral self is highly important to one’s identity, it undermines the effectiveness of cognitive rationalizations that otherwise allow one to inflict harm on others (Aquino et al., 2007).

Moral Identity and Personality. There are now insistent calls to study moral rationality within the broader context of personality (Walker & Hennig, 1998; Walker & Pitts, 1998; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004b). Indeed, Walker (1999) suggests that the study of moral functioning has been influenced inordinately by Kantian formalism in ethics and by the cognitive structural tradition in moral development, a condition he calls rational planexia. We are pulled off center, as if by gravity, to the study moral rationality at the expense of studying the moral agent as a whole person.

Yet moral reasoning cannot be abstracted cleanly from the complex dynamic system of personality of which is both part and product. If moral self-identity, or “character,” is the moral dimension of personality, then our accounts of these constructs must be compatible with well-attested models of personality. But which model?

Cervone (1991) argued that personality psychology divides into two disciplines on the question of how best to conceptualize the basic units of personality (see McAdams & Pals, 2006, for an alternative conceptualization). One discipline favors trait/dispositional constructs; the second discipline favors cognitive-affective mechanism or social cognitive units. The traits/disposition approach accounts for personality structure in terms of between-person classification of inter-individual variability; and describes individual differences in terms of “top-down” dispositional constructs as might be found in latent variable taxonomies, such as the Big 5 (extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, open-to-experience). In contrast, the social cognitive approach understands personality structure in terms of intra-individual, cognitive-affective mechanisms; and attempts to account for individual differences from the “bottom-up,” that is, in terms of specific, within-person psychological systems that are in dynamic interaction with changing situational contexts (Cervone, 2005). Scripts, schemas, episodes, plans, prototypes, and similar constructs are the units of analysis for social cognitive approaches to personality.

Both disciplines of personality psychology are represented in recent accounts of moral personality. For example, Walker and his colleagues have attempted to understand the personality of moral exemplars in terms of the Big 5 taxonomy. One study showed, for example, that the personality of moral exemplars was oriented towards conscientiousness and agreeableness (Walker, 1999). Agreeableness also characterized young adult moral exemplars (Matsuba & Walker, 2005). In a study of brave, caring and just Canadians, Walker and Pitts (1998) found that brave exemplars aligned with a complex of traits associated with extraversion; caring exemplars aligned with agreeableness; and just exemplars with a mixture of conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness to
experience. This pattern was largely replicated by Walker and Hennig (2004).

In contrast Lapsley and Narvaez (2004) have attempted a social cognitive approach to the moral personality. Although social cognitive theory draws attention to cognitive-affective mechanisms that influence social perception, these mechanisms also serve to create and sustain patterns of individual differences. If schemas are easily primed and readily activated ("chronically accessible") then they direct our attention selectively to certain features of our experience. This selective framing disposes one to select schema-compatible tasks, goals and settings that canalize and maintain our dispositional tendencies (Cantor, 1990). We choose environments, in other words, that support or reinforce our schema-relevant interests, which illustrates the reciprocal nature of person-context interactions. Moreover, we tend to develop highly practiced behavioral routines in those areas of our experience that are regulated by chronically accessible schemes. In these areas of our social experience we become "virtual experts," and in these life contexts social cognitive schemas function as "a ready, sometimes automatically available plan of action" (Cantor, 1990, p. 738). In this way chronically accessible schemas function as the cognitive carriers of dispositions.

Social cognitive theory asserts, then, that schema accessibility and conditions of activation are critical for understanding how patterns of individual differences are channeled and maintained. From this perspective Lapsley and Narvaez (2004) claim that a moral person, or a person who has a moral identity or character, is one for whom moral categories are chronically accessible. If having a moral identity is just when moral notions are central, important and essential one’s self-understanding, then notions that are central, important and essential are also those that are chronically accessible for appraising the social landscape. Chronically 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.

Recent research has attempted to document the social cognitive dimensions of moral cognition. For example, research shows that conceptions of good character (Lapsley & Lasky, 1999) and of moral, spiritual and religious persons (Walker & Pitts, 1998) are organized as cognitive prototypes. Moreover, moral chronicity appears to be a dimension of individual differences that influences spontaneous trait inference and text comprehension (Narvaez, Lapsley, Hagele & Lasky, 2006). In two studies Narvaez et al. (2006) showed that moral chronic and non-chronics respond differently to the dispositional and moral implications of social cues.

Educational Implications

The recent enthusiasm for theoretical and empirical analysis of moral self-identity has not yet produced well-articulated plans for making it the aim of education. One impediment is that moral self-identity is often conceptualized from the perspective of adult functioning, and it has proven difficult to work out possible developmental trajectories with enough specificity to yield testable empirical outcomes. This is particularly true for social cognitive accounts of moral self-identity. In the absence of strong developmental models it is often difficult to work out appropriate educational strategies. Without more precise knowledge of developmental mechanisms it is difficult to know just where, when and how to intervene.

Yet we are not completely helpless, either. Indeed, each of the perspectives on moral self-identity reviewed here yield clues on how to educate the moral self. For example, one implication of Blasi’s approach is that children should develop the proper moral desires as second-order volitions; and to master the virtues of self-control and integrity. But how to children develop wholehearted commitment to moral integrity? Blasi (2005) helpfully describes some possible steps towards the development of the moral will. Yet there are additional clues about possible pathways from research on the development of “conscience” in early childhood.

Kochanska and her colleagues (Kochanska, 2002; Kochanska et al., 2004; Kochanska, Aksan & Koenig, 1995) proposed a two-step model of emerging morality that begins with the quality of parent-child attachment. A strong, mutually responsive relationship with caregivers orients the child to be receptive to parental influence. Within the bonds 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.” 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 et al. (2002) 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” (p. 340).

This model would suggest that the source of wholehearted commitment to
morality that is characteristic of Blasian 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.”

Take a recent study by Clark and Ladd (2000) as another example
of the general point. They report evidence that a strong sense of
connectedness in the parent-child relationship fostered a “prosocial-
empathic” orientation in children that resulted in their enjoying numerous
adaptational advantages among peers. As the authors put it, “Through
connected interaction with parents, children develop an empathic
socioemotional orientation that serves as a foundation for interpreting social
situations and responding prosocially to agemates” (Clark & Ladd, 2000, p.
494; see also O’Reilly & Chatman, 1986, for a somewhat different
element). These data, along with Kochanka’s, suggest that the foundation
of self-control, integrity and moral desires is deeply relational. Moral self-
identity emerges within a history of secure attachment.

Two points should be underscored. First, this model would be
scarce comfort to Blasi to the extent that it yields only a morality of
internalization or of compliance. Yet, if there is something to it in broad
stroke, that is, if the moral self is congealed within a context of positive,
secure attachment relations (Reimer, 2005) — and a relational context is
unspecified in Blasi’s model but could use one — then this underscores the
importance of school bonding, caring school communities and attachment
to teachers as a basis for prosocial and moral development (Lapsley &
Narvaez, 2006).

For example, the Seattle Longitudinal Project shows that there is a
press toward behavior consistent with standards when standards are clear
and when students have feelings of commitment and attachment to school
Development Project showed the elementary school children’s sense of
community leads them to adhere to the values that are most salient in the
classroom (Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps & Delucchi, 1996). These
findings are quite close to Kochanska’s model of early conscience
development: secure attachment promotes committed compliance which
leads to internalization of norms, values and standards, suggesting some
continuity in the mechanisms by which children appropriate the moral
values of their family or classroom community (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006).

Power’s (2004; Power et al., 1989) model of the moral self also
underscores the importance of school community for inducing commitment
to moral ideals and norms. Power’s model is helpful in at least four ways.
First, it is informed by a robust developmental model. Second, there are
specific guidelines on how this should work: classrooms and schools should
be just communities that use participatory democratic practices and frequent
class meetings. Third, the model avoids the language of compliance and
internalization in favor of the language of appropriation and of moral
constructivism. Fourth, it is attested by a significant literature that
document the efficacy of moral atmosphere for promoting responsibility
(Higgins-D’Alessandro & Power, 2005; Power et al., 1989) and for
reducing transgressive behavior in schools (e.g., Brugman, Podolskij,

The moral exemplar (e.g., Colby & Damon, 1992) and systems
(Hart, 2005) approach to moral self-identity lead to similar educational
recommendations. For example, moral exemplar research holds out as a
goal the sort of prosocial commitment exhibited by care exemplars. But
how do individuals come to align personal goals with moral ones; or come to identify the self with ideal goals? Colby and Damon (1992) nominate social influence as a decisive mechanism. The key, in their view, is for young people to become absorbed by social networks that have moral goals. A recent study documented one mechanism by which friends influence prosocial behavior. Barry and Wentzel (2006) showed, for example, that a friend’s prosocial behavior can influence one’s own pursuit of moral goals (e.g., to be helpful or cooperative) when the affective relationship is strong and interactions are frequent (Barry & Wentzel, 2006).

Similarly, Hart’s (2005) research illustrates the importance of cultivating attachment to organizations that provide social opportunities for young people to engage their communities in prosocial service. Indeed, we have seen how community involvement predicts moral self-ideal in late adolescence (Pratt et al., 2003). There is a significant literature that documents that salutary effect of participation in voluntary organizations and service learning opportunities more generally on prosocial behavior and moral civic identity (C. Flanagan, 2004; Youniss & Yates, 1997, 1999).

One challenge for a social cognitive theory of moral self-identity is to specify the developmental sources of moral chronicity. Lapsley & Narvaez (2004) suggest that moral chronicity 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. In other words, at some point specific autobiographical memories must be integrated into a narrative form that references a self whose story it is. Autobiographical memory is also a social construction elaborated by means of dialogue within a web of interlocution. Parental interrogatives help children organize events into personally relevant autobiographical memories which provide, as part of the self-narrative, action-guiding scripts that become frequently practiced, over-learned, routine, habitual and automatic. Some of events are surely of moral or prosocial significance. Hence parental interrogatives might also include reference to norms, standards and values so that the moral ideal-self becomes part of the child’s autobiographical narrative. In 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). This suggests, though, that the education of moral self-ideal is not always a matter of pedagogy or curriculum and does not take place primarily in schools.

Doubts and Futures
As we have seen, moral self-identity is an attractive concept and a promising one. It seems to capture something important about the link between personal agency and the construction of moral ideals. It opens up possibilities for engaging other psychological literatures, particularly those regarding personality and cognition, with the goal of deriving robust integrative models of moral functioning. Moreover, implications for educating the moral self seem broadly compatible with developmental insights about qualities of attachment and affective interpersonal experiences at home, school, and neighborhood; and compatible, too, with instructional best practice with respect to the importance of caring classrooms, just communities, service learning and participation in voluntary organizations at school and in the wider community.

But there are reasons for pause. Nucci (2004a,b) has provided the most extensive commentary on the moral self construct. One problem concerns the claim that moral notions are somehow more central to the identity of moral exemplars than non-exemplars; that with a moral self-identity one holds morality in higher regard; that as a dimension of individual differences, some people just don’t have a moral self while others do.

Nucci’s (2004a) objections are several. First, he generally doubts that anyone would deny the importance of morality for the self. Virtually
everyone thinks that morality is important. Although it is possible for people to disagree about how morality might be displayed for given situations and contexts, he notes that “people generally attend to moral social interactions and have common views of prima facie moral obligations” (p. 119). Second, there is ambiguity about just when and where a moral self-identity is evinced. Indeed, current theory on the moral self does not, in his view, come to grips sufficiently with the heterogeneity of the self system. Our self-concepts are highly differentiated and domain specific; and our self-evaluations are similarly specific, flexible and subject to discounting. Mindful of such complexity, when are we confident in ascribing moral self-identity to an agent?

Much current research seems confident is ascribing a moral self to individuals who volunteer in the community—they are “care exemplars” --- even though we know little about their motivation for service (perhaps it was only to burnish a resume). But what about the leaders of the Weathermen underground who took up action against an immoral war by engaging in violent protest? Was John Brown exercising the prerogatives of moral self-identity at Harpers Ferry? What is the true measure of a man’s moral character, when he leads the nation in a heroic struggle for civil rights, or when he has serial extramarital affairs along the way? Most biographical studies of individuals who lives are marked by extraordinary moral accomplishment also reveal instances of appalling moral failure. This observation is made banal by the uneven manifestation of moral qualities in our own lives let alone the lives of heroic exemplars. Yet the language of moral self-identity seems inadequate to capture this complexity. The construct seems insensitive to the demand of situations, underestimates contextual influence, and otherwise neglects the social contexts that interact dynamically with dispositional tendencies (Doris, 2002). Nucci (2004a) asks: “Does our moral identity shift with each context? Is it the case that as the self-same person it is the salience of morality that shifts with the context?” (p. 127). As a corrective Nucci (2004a) calls for a “contextualist structural theory” of moral cognition to account for when individuals prioritize morality and when they do not.

Four additional problems are noted by Nucci (2004a). First, it is reductionist to argue that the motivation for moral action is the desire to maintain consistency between action and moral identity. To do so reduce the contextual complexity of moral situations to the simple judgment of whether to take a certain action is consistent with one’s sense of self. Second, self-consistency is not only reductionism but a species of ethical egoism. It reduces questions about fairness, justice and human welfare to questions about whether actions accord with desires or makes one feel good about the self. Following Frankena (1963), Nucci (2004a) argues that self-consistency is not a motive for moral action, but rather judgment that it was “the right thing to do” (see also, Nucci, 2005). Third, there is very little specification of the developmental features of moral self-identity. Fourth, in some instances, a moral identity is utterly dysfunctional if our identification with a moral framework is so total that we are frozen into moral rigidity or else burn with the crazed indignation of the moral zealot. Moral saints make life unbearable for the rest of us, and you couldn’t be friends with one (Wolf, 1982; also, Sorensen, 2004).

There are also compelling criticisms of the orienting philosophical framework(s) that stands behind current work on moral self-identity (e.g, Keba, 2004). One is never sure how much of this should count against the psychological theory, yet such criticism does seem useful in providing a perspective on possible lines of theory revision.

For example, the language of “centrality” is used to describe when moral traits are core to self-identity. Yet, as Rorty and Wong (1990) point out, there are at least seven ways for a trait to be central to identity, and there is no necessary connection among them. Moreover, personal identity has plural aspects---somatic/temperamental dispositions, social role identity, socially defined group identity, ideal identity ---and the relative centrality of traits may be allocated differently across these aspects (and sometimes depending on the context). Differentiating the notion of centrality in this way, and what it means for the configuration of moral self-identity, might address some of the concerns raised by Nucci (2004a).

There is also criticism of the notion of weak and strong evaluation (Taylor, 1989) and, by extension, first- and second-order desires (Frankfurt, 1971). O. Flanagan (1990, p. 37) argues, for example, that strong evaluation “overstates the degree to which rich and effective identity, as
well as moral decency, is tied to articulate self-comprehension and evaluation.” He continues: “Identity and goodness do not require reflectiveness to any significant degree” (p. 37). Flanagan (1990) objects to the claim that identity is vouchsafed by strong evaluation, that strong evaluation requires linguistic competence and transparent articulacy, and that strong evaluators are persons who make ethical assessments of their desires (where ethical is defined broadly). He argues instead that self-comprehension and self-interpretation does not require rich linguistic environments or even reflective judgments. Flanagan (1990) writes:

"Such self-comprehension might involve an evolving sense of who one is, of what is important to oneself, and how one wants to live one’s life. But the evolution of this sense might proceed relatively unreflectively, possibly for the most part unconsciously. It might be conceived of along the lines of the acquisition of athletic know-how and savvy by way of continuous practice” (p. 52).

One can recognize and acknowledge standards and conform behavior to them, “without ever having linguistically formulated the standard and without even possessing the ability to do so when pressed” (O. Flanagan, 1990, p. 53).

Flanagan (1990) rejects, then, a notion of strong evaluation that is too intellectualistic. A better way to go, in his view, is to endorse Frankfurt’s (1982) notion that identity is constituted by that which we care most about. Adopting the Frankfurt notion has two advantages. First, it allows for identity “in people whose lives are guided by cares, concern, imports and commitments, but who are for whatever reason and to whatever degree, inarticulate about them” (p. 54). Second, this way of framing identity is non-moralistic in the way that strong evaluation is not. As Flanagan (1990) put it, “For better or worse, what a particular human individual cares about can involve all manner of nonethical concerns (not all of which are thereby loony and low-minded, although they might be) and involve almost nothing in the way of ethical evaluation” (p. 54).

This half-step into the deep end reveal certain fault lines in how moral self-identity might be understood. In some ways, Flanagan’s (1990) critique of strong evaluation is not necessarily a challenge to the dominant way(s) that moral self-identity is understood. For example, the Frankfurt formulation that links identity to those things that we care about most has resonance with key themes in Blasi’s (2004, 2005) writings on the self. Moreover, contemporary theories of moral self-identity reviewed here would not dispute Flanagan’s (1990) point that what someone cares about most could involve all manner of non-ethical concerns. No one is committed to an overly faithful reading of strong evaluation.

That said, Flanagan’s (1990) critique does push extant psychological theory in interesting ways. It holds open the possibility that self-comprehension of the second-order type might proceed unreflectively, perhaps automatically and outside of consciousness. It holds out the possibility that psychological theories that require conscious, intentional and volitional self-appropriation and self-mastery might overestimate the intellectual resources necessary for the development of the moral will; and overestimate the need for articulate reflective judgment of the sort that is envisioned for moral self-identity.

Future research on moral self-identity could surely take up these and other matters with profit. It might ask, for example: What is the nature of second-order desires, and how transparent must they be articulate self-comprehension? How and where do automaticity and “non-conscious” control intersect with the development of the moral will? What does self-appropriation look like in early development? In addition, future research must specify more precise developmental models. Although it is useful to explore adult forms of the moral self, particularly as these are regarded as endpoints of a developmental process, we must now work back to discern the proper trajectories that yield these adult forms as outcomes.

By far the most glaring deficiency in moral self-identity research is the relative absence of well-attested assessments of the construct. There is no consensus on how best to measure moral self-identity in adulthood; and I am not aware of any systematic attempt to measure it in children, a fact that explains the paucity of developmental research. Nothing will stop the momentum of scholarly interest in moral self-identity more surely than the failure to develop suitable assessments. Indeed, most of the advances in
moral psychology research over the last fifty years were made possible by the availability of well-regarded (interview and questionnaire) assessments of moral development and principled reasoning. Clearly the development of such assessments for moral self-identity should be a high priority.

Finally, how best to characterize the units of moral self-identity is in dispute. As we have seen, there is some suspicion of the language of cognitive “representation” to describe adequately the subjective self-as-agent. Recall that the intentional action of the moral agent was said to be “cognitive but non-representational.” Certainly alternative conceptualizations of cognition are welcome. Indeed, interest in non-representational models of enactive or embodied cognition (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1993) might be the way to go to conceptualize the intentional action and volitional agency of the moral self. Working out the implications of non-representational models of cognition for the moral domain is a fascinating and promising line of research for the future.

References


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