**Benevolence in a Justice-Based World:**

**The Power of Sentiments in Predicting Prosocial Behaviors**

Gustavo Carlo

University of Missouri

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“Benevolence…arises from a great degree of misery, or any degree strongly sympathized with…”

― David Hume, Treatise of Human Nature

“Were we incapable of empathy – of putting ourselves in the position of others and seeing that their suffering is like our own – then ethical reasoning would lead nowhere. If emotion without reason is blind, then reason without emotion is impotent.”

― Peter Singer, Writings on an Ethical Life

Scholars have long articulated and debated various conceptions of morality. Among the most challenging questions regarding the nature of morality is the issue of the place of benevolence and caring in the framework of understanding moral development. Often presented as a stark contrast to justice-oriented approaches in moral development, benevolence was frequently overshadowed by justice in the prominent developmental theories of Piaget, and especially, Kohlberg (1969). For decades, cognitive-structural developmental theories that emphasized a justice and rational-based approach dominated the scholarly work in moral development. However, in recent years, theoretical and methodological developments, and a newfound recognition of the role of sentiments has shifted greater attention to the prominent role of benevolence in understanding morality. The first major section of the present essay briefly contrasts justice- and benevolence-focused perspectives. The second major section of the essay proposes a conceptual distinction between principled-based (e.g., moral reasoning) and compassion-based (i.e. sympathy) altruistic behaviors to advance our understanding of the role of benevolence in morality. The third section briefly reviews relevant research on the relative predictive value of thoughts (i.e. moral reasoning) and sentiments (i.e. sympathy) on altruistic and other forms of prosocial behaviors. We present a strong case for the central role of sentiments and benevolent traits in the role of understanding morality. Although thoughts and reasoning play an important role in morality, we propose that benevolent sentiments ultimately determine what is good and just.

**Two Main Dimensions of Morality: Justice and Benevolence**

*The case for justice*

Justice is a predominantly cognitive, evaluative process based on a-priori beliefs and tenets regarding what is deemed good. What is just is what is regarded good by an evaluation of one’s or others’ deeds. When the deed is consistent with one’s notions of good, then the observer will deem the action to be just. In contrast, when the action is contrary with one’s beliefs or when there is a lack of action, that can result in such behavior being regarded as unjust.

Many early philosophers and social scientists considered benevolence to be a moral domain subsumed under the domains of justice and fairness. Caring for others was often considered an expression of what is just and fair—individuals should care for others because that is what ultimately brings justice and fairness consequences. Benevolence was viewed as a means towards justice and fairness rather than an end in and of itself.

Moreover, according to strong proponents of morality as justice, the close relation between benevolence and the sentiments (such as sympathy, empathy, compassion) lent benevolence as a concept that is unreliable and ill-suited to account for defining moral truths. Borrowing heavily from the early philosophical writings of classical Greek philosophers (e.g., Plato), such proponents pointed out the strong basis for logic and rationality to ascertain universal notions of good and bad. As such, moral reasoning (i.e., decision making in situations involving issues of right and wrong) was viewed as the primary influence of moral action.

In his classic essay, Kohlberg (1969) asserted that justice and fairness are the two primary aspects of morality. Furthermore, following the assertions of rationalists, Kohlberg proposed that moral reasoning is most strongly predictive of moral actions. Sentiments, in contrast, were considered weak because such emotions are transient and easily influenced by situational conditions. Caring and benevolence, which are strongly associated with sentiments, are weak motives that cannot results in obligatory-based actions. Moreover, moral sentiments lead to relative concepts of morality rather than universal moral truths, and relativism ultimately succumbs societies to ethical and moral collapse.

*The case for benevolence*

The often-contrasted perspective posits that benevolence takes precedence over justice in matters of morality (e.g., Blum, 1980; Hume). According to these proponents, benevolence stems from the care-based processes of empathy, sympathy, and compassion. Empathy refers to feeling the same as another—it is a vicarious emotional response that results from apprehending another person’s emotional state (Hoffman, Eisenberg). Closely related to empathy is sympathy—feelings of sorrow or concern for another’s needy situation. Compassion is defined as thoughts and feelings congruent with another’s distress circumstances. These sentiments are believed to form the core motivational bases for prosocial behaviors (i.e., voluntary acts that benefit others), including, importantly, altruistic behaviors (i.e., voluntary acts primarily intended to benefit others with little or no regard for self rewards, often high cost action).

According to scholars who emphasize the care-oriented nature of humans, benevolence is a natural occurring, intrinsically-based motive that permeates all humans (Hume ). Empathy, sympathy, and compassion are evolutionarily adaptive and deeply rooted in biological structures and mechanisms including genes and neurotransmitters (e.g., oxytocin, vasopressin) (see Eisenberg et al., 2006). Indeed, research demonstrates that benevolent traits are present early in life, present across several social animal species, and there are relatively stable individual differences in these traits across time and space (Carlo, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2006). Moreover, sociocognitive (e.g., perspective taking skills) and socialization (e.g., warm parenting, parental inductions) mechanisms have been theorized to facilitate the expression of these benevolent traits and actions, which result in individual differences. Although there is ample evidence on the predisposition to act in benevolent ways, there is also ample evidence on the existence of selfishly-motivated sentiments (e.g., anger) and traits (e.g., aggression; Dodge ). That both selfish and selfless motives dynamically co-exist no doubt results in moral dilemmas and in developmental and individual differences in associated moral behaviors (Carlo, 2006).

More importantly, perhaps, is the assertion that true morality stems from benevolence (Hume). Benevolence provides the benchmark for evaluating morality including justice, fairness, honesty, and equality. Humans are endowed with the capacity to assess actions as moral or immoral on the basis of whether such actions reflect the sentiments of humaneness and natural concern for others. Furthermore, these sentiments are closely associated with consonant values, principles, and virtues that may induce or reinforce such sentiments (Carlo & Randall, 2001; Eisenberg et al., 1991). Hume asserts that benevolence serves an ultimate utilitarian function such that these sentiments foster goodwill towards others, and societal approbation and happiness.

In other words, though what is deemed just or fair can depend upon one’s point of view, what is humane and caring (i.e. the benevolence approach) is ultimately what results in the least harm and the greatest benefit for others. For example, if one child hits another child, then the victim of the aggression might deem it only fair to hit back. This judgment of fairness is based on the logical argument that getting hit justifies hitting back (e.g., “an eye for an eye”). However, hitting that child back still results in harm toward the other child and is not humane—therefore, the benevolence perspective asserts that hitting is immoral. Similarly, with regards to the treatment of undocumented immigrants, application of a benevolence perspective usually results in a different approach than a rational, justice-based approach. Specifically, one can assert the logical argument that undocumented individuals should not have access to health care services because such individuals are breaking the law and should be treated as criminals. However, any laws that prevent access to health care services for undocumented persons likely results in inhumane consequences, harm, and suffering on those individuals. In this case, benevolence leads one to adopt a stance that such laws are immoral. In contrast, the justice-based, logical approach can justify the creation of such inhumane laws.

Other sociomoral issues can be evaluated on the basis of this distinction. For example, capital punishment can be viewed from a justice-based approach as justifiable in order to apply equal treatment (i.e. death) to someone who has committed murder. However, from a benevolence-based approach, capital punishment is not considered moral because such an action is inhumane and results in great harm (and perhaps suffering) on an individual with little benefit towards others (especially when weighed against other non-capital punishment alternatives). Life imprisonment, for example, provides an alternative that is less harmful but still punishing with benefits for others and society (e.g., protection and safety).

A final example provides some insight into understanding how previously regarded acceptable social actions can transform over time and result in strong moral evaluations. In the U.S., cigarette smoking was deemed to be socially acceptable (even desirable) by many individuals, especially because such actions were considered an individual right (a strong justice based rational argument). However, as research accumulated on the negative health problems associated with nicotine, and especially when research demonstrated that second-hand smoking posed equal or greater heath risks, public opinion on cigarette smoking changed. The clear and demonstrated health risks and problems posed by smoking in public places pulled for a benevolence-focused basis such that smoking in public is now considered immoral. In other words, although individuals may have the right to smoke following a rights-based logical argument, the inhumaneness and clear health risks of smoking suggest that such behaviors are deemed immoral ( ). In fact, research suggests that individuals who smoke (no matter where they choose to smoke) are generally viewed as immoral rather than moral ( ). In such cases (consider alcohol drinking as well), benevolence-based arguments trump justice-based arguments in moral evaluations, especially as new information and understanding is gathered regarding the harmful or inhumane (relative to the benefits) consequences of such actions.

Of course, adopting a benevolence approach in and of itself does not always lead to easy resolutions of moral dilemmas. As noted earlier, the challenge of difficult moral dilemmas can be attributed most times to the tension between different moral themes (e.g., issues of justice versus benevolence) or to judgments of the humaneness (or harm) to multiple persons or groups or across time (i.e., short term versus long term benefits). However, we assert that justice based arguments that are based solely on justice- or rights-based, logical arguments often results in immoral actions that can be easily justified if a benevolence perspective is not considered.

To summarize, a justice-focused approach tends to emphasize the legal, rights- or justice-based aspects of a situation whereas a benevolence-approach emphasizes the humaneness of such situations. We assert that the proposed framework significantly extends our understanding of many present day, sociomoral debates by identifying the justice-focused versus benevolence-focused basis of proponents on each side. However, we further assert that a benevolence-focused approach provides a strong basis for ascertaining the moral strength of actions and behaviors relative to a justice-focused approach. We further argue that sentiment traits (such as sympathy) generally better predict compassion-based moral behaviors whereas thought traits (such as moral reasoning) better predict justice-based moral actions. In the next section, we elaborate further on this assertion and apply this framework to understanding prosocial behaviors—including altruistic behaviors.

**Prosocial Behaviors as Moral Behaviors**

Although the questions about the nature of human morality continue to be the center of much debate, one area of research that informs this debate is research on prosocial behaviors. Prosocial behaviors (i.e., actions that benefit others) encompass a wide array of behaviors. Many such actions are not morally-based but rather correspond more accurately as actions that may be motivated by a desire to conform to social norms or to personal prudence. For example, holding the door open for a stranger may be motivated by the desire to conform to societal norms and does not necessarily require strongly internalized principles or sympathy responding. Similarly, sharing one’s toys with another person could be motivated by pragmatic concerns, such as a desire to gain that other person’s approval or praise. On the other hand, some prosocial behaviors may be motivated by strong internalized principles of good and bad, or by a strong compassionate response to the needs or circumstances of others. In such cases, the motive to help others is not primarily moved by a self-enhancement or expectation of reward. Under these circumstances, the helper’s focus is on meeting the needs of the person in need. These actions are referred to as altruistic prosocial behaviors (Carlo, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2006; Staub, 1978). In summary, we define altruistic prosocial behaviors as voluntary (not forced) actions that are intended to primarily benefit others and occur without expectation of self-reward (psychological or material) and a cost to the self.

Interest in altruistic actions is great. Scholars have long debated the existence of altruistic behaviors. Not only is there debate surrounding the notion of whether such actions exist, there are many challenges to measuring and the complex characteristics of such behaviors. The present essay will surely not resolve this long-standing debate. Indeed, if anything, this essay will likely spark greater debate. Suffice to say, I assume that such actions occur, can be measured, and propose that the elements of such actions can be identified. I will shortly review some of this work from on our own lab. However, before I review the empirical work, I summarize a conceptual distinction that could significantly advance the scholarship in this field.

**Justice-Based versus Compassion-Based Moral Behaviors**

Social scientists who advocate the notion of prosocial behaviors (including altruistic behaviors) have identified three basic motives for such actions (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Staub, 2005). First, altruistic behaviors can be motivated by strongly internalized principles or mores that advocate for the consideration and needs of others. Such circumstances may include the belief that human suffering should never be allowed or that all humans should be treated fairly and justly. Examples of these may include the person who deems it worthy to treat people who suffer from HIV/AIDS or the individual who devotes themselves to fight against human trafficking. Their primary motive for engaging in actions to redress these issues may be thoughtful and carefully considered or it may not be explicitly articulated but they strongly endorse these beliefs or values. I refer to these circumstances as *justice-based altruistic moral actions*.

A second identified motive for altruistic behaviors is sympathy or compassion. Similar to the examples provided above, these individuals are motivated to help others in need for the primary benefit of the persons in need rather than for personal gain. However, rather than being moved primarily by principles or values, these individuals are more moved by emotional or affective processes namely, sympathy or compassion. These individuals may be particularly prone to emotionally-evocative situations or in dire, emergency situations—these conditions may trigger sympathetic responding. The goal of the resulting action, then, is to relieve the distress of the person(s) in need. These behaviors are hereafter referred to as *compassion-based altruistic moral actions*.

The third motive is a combination of both internalized principles and sympathy. Indeed, several scholars have noted that in many cases, it is likely that both internalized principles and sympathy play roles though one process may be somewhat muted or overwhelmed by the other process at any given point in time or in specific situations. For example, certain altruistic acts may be conducted under circumstances that require much reasoning and thinking about abstract moral issues (e.g., whether to vote for a law that provides better access to health care services for low-SES families). In contrast, whether one should donate one’s kidney for a family member in need requires emotional sensitivity (i.e., sympathy) as well as moral reasoning about the cost and benefits/consequences of that action. Finally, if one sees a person fall and start bleeding, an emergency response to attempt to stop the bleeding does not require much moral reasoning. These examples suggest that benevolence and justice motives and traits can coexist but that the relevance of one process versus the other depends in part upon the characteristics of the situation.

**Relations Between Moral Reasoning and Sympathy and Prosocial Behaviors**

Following the distinction between justice- and compassion-based approaches, we suggest that justice-based (e.g., moral reasoning) and compassion-based (e.g., sympathy) processes are involved in predicting altruistic and other forms of moral behaviors. Evidence that both processes coexist can be gleamed from fMRI research on the brain regions activated during moral decision-making. It should be noted that such research would likely provide an overestimate of the relevance of higher level cognitive regions of the brain given that most of the existing research requires participants to read (hypothetical, abstract) moral dilemma stories rather than be immersed in emotionally-evocative situations. Nonetheless, in general, the research findings suggest that both cognitive-centered regions and emotion-centered regions of the brain are activated when faced with prosocial and moral dilemma situations (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Lamm, Batson, & Decety, 2007; Moll, Eslinger, & de Oliveira-Souza, 2001).

Because most prosocial behaviors are primarily benevolence-based, we propose that sympathy predicts most forms of such behaviors. However, some forms of prosocial behaviors may require elaborate evaluations about costs and benefits, consideration of individual rights and societal laws, or consideration of personal and situational factors. In such cases, moral judgments may be particularly relevant in predicting those forms of prosocial behaviors. Thus, we further assert that moral thoughts (e.g., moral reasoning) and moral emotions (e.g., sympathy) may uniquely predict specific forms of altruistic and prosocial behaviors. Because few studies examine specific forms of prosocial behaviors or directly contrast the predictive effects of moral reasoning and sympathy on prosocial behaviors, direct tests of these hypotheses are sparse.

For the past decade, our lab has conducted a series of studies examining the correlates of specific forms of prosocial behaviors. Based on prior research and focus group interviews, we developed a measure that assesses six types of prosocial behaviors. The Prosocial Tendencies Measure (PTM) assesses altruistic, dire, compliant, anonymous, emotional, and public forms of prosocial behavior in adolescents and young adults (Carlo & Randall, 2002; Carlo et al., 2003; Carlo et al., 2010). Evidence on the psychometric properties of the PTM is accumulating and such evidence suggests good internal consistencies, relatively high test-retest reliabilities, strong factor structure, adequate measurement equivalence (across age, gender, ethnicity), and supportive construct, convergent, and predictive validity (see Carlo, 2014).

In a series of cross-sectional studies, we found a specific pattern of relations between moral reasoning and sympathy and specific forms of prosocial behaviors. In the first study (Carlo & Randall, 2002), among college students, internalized prosocial moral reasoning (principled level reasoning) was positively linked to altruistic, compliant, and dire prosocial behaviors and negatively linked to public prosocial behaviors (a egoistic form of helping). However, interestingly, sympathy was positively related to altruistic, compliant, dire, anonymous, and emotional prosocial behaviors, and negatively related to public prosocial behaviors. Thus, there were relatively fewer significant relations between moral reasoning and prosocial behaviors than between sympathy and such behaviors.

A similar study with early and middle aged adolescents showed a more nuanced pattern of relations (Carlo et al., 2003). Among early adolescents, internalized prosocial moral reasoning was positively related to altruistic, emotional, anonymous, and compliant prosocial behaviors, and negatively related to public prosocial behaviors. Among middle-aged adolescents, internalized prosocial moral reasoning was only positively linked to emotional and dire prosocial behaviors. However, there were relatively more significant relations between sympathy and prosocial behaviors (especially altruistic, dire, emotional, and anonymous) than between moral reasoning and prosocial behaviors. Perhaps more importantly, the overall magnitude of the significant correlation coefficients was relatively larger between sympathy and behaviors (range from .37 to .70) than between moral reasoning and behaviors (.23 to .37).

A study of young adolescent, Mexican Americans (Carlo et al., 2010) showed that sympathy was significantly related to six different types of prosocial behaviors and that the range of relations ranged from -.19 to .63. In contrast, for the relations between moral reasoning and such behaviors, there were only three significant relations and the coefficients ranged from -.24 to .35. Thus, showing again, that sympathy was relatively more consistently and stronger related to prosocial behaviors than moral reasoning.

In an interesting twist, Laible and her colleagues (Laible et al., 2008) conducted a study that created a moral affect factor (consisting of empathic anger, sympathy, guilt, shame) and a moral cognitive factor (moral reasoning, moral internalization). Then, the researchers used these factors to predict six types of prosocial behaviors (including willingness to defend a bully victim). Both moral cognitions and moral emotions predicted four types of prosocial behaviors but the range of coefficients ranged from -.08 to .36 versus -.09 to .54, respectively. In general, there were relatively stronger effects for the sentiments than for the thoughts.

Although relatively few longitudinal studies of prosocial behaviors exist, we examined the longitudinal predictive effects of trait prosocial moral reasoning and trait sympathy on trait prosocial behaviors (one year later) in a sample of adolescents (Carlo et al., 2010). As expected, both moral cognitions and sympathy positively predicted prosocial behaviors one year later. However, we should note that in addition to the direct effect of sympathy on prosocial behaviors, sympathy indirectly predicted prosocial behaviors via predicting prosocial moral reasoning. Similarly, in a three-year longitudinal study (Carlo et al., 2011), both moral reasoning and sympathy predicted prosocial behaviors. However, the relations between sympathy and prosocial behaviors ranged from .18 to .62 (depending upon whether mothers or fathers were included and when examining both concurrent and longitudinal paths). In contrast, the analogous path coefficients between moral reasoning and prosocial behaviors ranged from -.01 to .15. These findings suggest that although both moral reasoning and sympathy generally predict prosocial behaviors, sympathy accounts for relatively more variance in predicting such behaviors via direct and indirect paths.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate more relatively consistent relations between sympathy and prosocial behaviors (especially altruistic behaviors) than between moral reasoning and such actions, and when such relations are significant, the effects of sympathy are relatively stronger than those of moral reasoning. Clearly, there are methodological limitations such as a reliance on self-report measures and the mostly correlational design of our studies. However, thus far, across samples from different ethnic groups and across different ages, the findings are somewhat consistent. Moreover, congruent with our findings, are meta-analytic reviews of the literature that report a relatively stronger overall effect size for the relations between sympathy and prosocial behaviors (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987) than between moral reasoning and such actions (Carlo et al., 2009; Underwood & Moore, 1982).

**Conclusions**

The primary purpose of the present essay is to suggest that benevolence plays a relatively strong role in predicting prosocial and moral behaviors. I am not here to argue against the relevance of moral reasoning and other sociocognitive traits and skills. Quite the contrary, the research clearly demonstrates that such processes are important, though sometimes relatively weak, predictors of moral behaviors. Furthermore, we hypothesize that moral cognitive processes are likely to better predict some forms of moral behaviors better than sympathy and other sentiments. In addition, we have asserted and demonstrated in prior research, that social cognitions can have interactive effects with other traits and with situational factors (Carlo et al., 1991; Knight et al., 1994; see Carlo et al., 2009). Indeed, that thoughts and sentiments are dynamically intertwined most likely reflects the reality and complexity of moral study.

However, in the field of moral development, there has been a clear overemphasis on moral cognitive processes and on the domains of justice and fairness (see Kohlberg, 1971; Turiel, 2006) relative to moral emotive processes and the domain of care and benevolence. Although there have been some attempts to integrate and incorporate moral emotive processes into cognitive-developmental moral theories (e.g., Gibbs, 2013), such attempts generally continue to place a more prominent role on moral cognitive processes. Perhaps more importantly, care and benevolence are still viewed as secondary to the relevance of the justice motive in understanding morality (see e.g., Turiel, 2006).

On the other hand, alternative views (Haidt ), deemphasize moral cognitive processes and propose a predominant role for moral intuitions. According to Haidt and his colleagues (Haidt, 2001), moral intuitions are defined as, “ .” These scholars assert that: a) moral cognitions are mostly irrelevant to predicting moral behaviors, b) that such processes are unreliable and often post-hoc explanations for behaviors, and c) that studies of moral cognitions suffer from cognitive distortions and biases. Moreover, borrowing heavily from evolutionary theory and from research on the primary role of emotions (akin to the primacy of cognition and affect debate; e.g., Lazarus ; Zajonc Shweder ), the primacy of intuitions over cognition is asserted. There is not sufficient space here to thoroughly review and critique this recent perspective (but see Narvaez; Nucci). Moreover, Haidt ( ) seems to have tempered his perspective somewhat though still asserts the dominance of intuition over deliberate reasoning. I will, however, note a few observations regarding the limited utility of this particular version of intuitive theory.

Although moral intuition theory presents a relief to the decades of dominance of moral cognitions (Kohlberg’s theory in particular), the theory ultimately suffers from the analog fallacy as those prior theories—it presents an unbalanced framework that overemphasizes the role of intuition. For example, there is ample evidence from longitudinal studies that early moral reasoning predict later moral behaviors (Carlo et al., 2010; 2011; Eisenberg et al., 1995; 1999). Furthermore, priming studies further suggest that priming thoughts (e.g., principles) can induce moral actions consistent with those principles ( ). Other studies demonstrate the important regulatory role of cognitive processes (such as language) on emotions and affect ( ). Moreover, as noted earlier, the accumulating evidence from fMRI studies shows that both emotive and cognitive regions of the brain (such as the parietal frontal lobe junction) are activated when participants are confronted with moral behavior opportunities (see e.g., Young ) and that the cognitive region of the brain is predominantly activated when participants are presented with moral tasks that require deliberate reasoning ( ). This growing body of research that utilizes diverse methodologies clearly demonstrates the relevance of deliberate moral cognitions in morality. That deliberate cognitive processes have little relevance under some circumstances is not surprising as much as intuitive processes may have little relevance under other circumstances.

Perhaps the most perplexing aspect of Haidt’s ( ) approach is the definition and concept of moral intuitions. First, the definition of moral intuition is itself vague—it is presented as synonymous with emotions or sentiments. Indeed, Haidt credits his ideas as Humean though Hume himself emphasized sentiments, compassion, and sympathy rather than intuition. Second, Hume’s perspective, and the perspective admonished in our research approach, considers benevolence as the basis for morality. Intuitions per say have little or no intrinsic relevance to benevolence—the basic moral motive that Hume strongly advocated. Therefore, intuitions provide little direct insight into understanding morality unless such intuitions are accompanied by a reference to justice, benevolence, harm, or other moral motives. Third, as noted by other scholars, there is a general lack of consideration of developmental processes in understanding moral intuitions. To assert that moral intuitions “drive” morality suggests that such processes preempted reasoning development in early childhood as well. However, moral socialization research demonstrates the significant role of early socializing agents (e.g., parents) in fostering higher order moral reasoning and decision making ( ), and that parents and culture transmit values and foster sympathy in their children. Moreover, as alluded to earlier, other research shows that moral reasoning in early life can predict moral behaviors in later life. It is difficult to reconcile the notion that very young children could have already acquired moral intuitive notions of right and wrong or benevolence or harm unless one proposes a strong nativist position (e.g., genetic predisposition) for moral intuition. Ironically, Haidt’s own research supports a sociocultural perspective that acknowledges cross-cultural differences in moral understanding (Haidt et al., 1993), which somewhat undermines a nativist position. And fourth, we propose that there is little utility in proposing the concept of moral intuition rather than simply considering much of the research findings from their approach as sympathy. For example, the “moral dumbfoundness” that Haidt alludes to can be more simply explained by the tension between sympathy (or some other moral emotion) and moral thought. Simply stated, when faced with a difficult moral dilemma, individuals may find it challenging to articulate their reasoning because of the tension between distinct moral motives (e.g., rights of an individual in conflict with one’s own empathic response for that individual’s predicament). There is no need to invoke the concept of moral intuition. This perspective not only aligns research on intuition much more accurately with Hume’s perspective—that sympathy and benevolence are relevant—but also more closely with evolutionary, neuroscientific, developmental, and social psychological theories and research.

Our perspective presents a tempered alternative that moral emotions are sometimes more relevant than cognitions, depending upon the characteristics of the situation. We assert that benevolence, via sympathy, plays a powerful role—equal to that of justice and other moral motives—in understanding morality. However, we acknowledge that some altruistic actions are primarily associated with issues of justice and reasoning while others are primarily associated with issues of benevolence and sympathy. Furthermore, there is often a dynamic interplay between benevolence and justice motives, which accounts for the challenge of resolving some of the prevalent moral issues in our society. Most importantly, however, a benevolence approach provides a powerful standard for evaluating moral dilemmas and actions. What is deemed just and fair is prone to the subjective perspectives of observers and protagonists; whereas, benevolence—whether an action is ultimately humane—presents a relatively clear barometer on right or wrong. We assert that this latter perspective more accurately reflects Hume’s notion of morality. As Hume wrote, “ .” Finally, we do agree with moral intuitists that the Platonic and Kohlbergian notions of morality are too narrow but we diverge in our judgment on how far we should push the pendulum towards the other side—lest we fail once again to learn from the fallacies of prior debates that creates false extremist positions on the role of moral cognitions versus moral emotions.

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