



Moral expertise

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ABSTRACT

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We offer a theory of moral expertise based on an updated version of the Thomistic concept of *habitus*. We maintain that mature moral control arises from internalized standards of belief married to corresponding actions; the result is moral expertise. Beliefs and actions (conceptualized as *habitus*) coalesce in a moral identity, which is then sustained by the beliefs and actions that comprise the *habitus*; what we do affects who we are and what we believe, just as what we believe guides what we do. In support of these claims, we examine recent research on moral judgment, moral identity, and moral emotions.

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1. Introduction

The notion of morality as a perfectible skill dates at least to Plato. However, the concept of moral expertise as a *psychological* (rather than spiritual) phenomenon is of a more recent vintage (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005; Rossano, 2008). As Hardy and Carlo (2005) have noted, recent theories of moral behavior have followed a path from Kohlberg's (1969) developmental stage theory through the moral socialization theories of the 1970s (e.g., Hoffman, 1970) and the social intuitionism of the early 2000s (e.g., Haidt, 2001), to an emphasis on moral identity and moral expertise today (e.g., Blasi, 2005; McConnell, 1984; Musschenga, 2009; Narvaez, 2010; Rossano, 2008).

The emerging view is that moral behavior depends upon accurate apprehension of moral situations, comprehension of potential solutions, and actions tied to those beliefs. Narvaez, Gleason, and Mitchell (2010), for example, have offered a sophisticated model of what they call "adaptive" ethical expertise. In their view, achieving positive moral outcomes depends first upon recognition of the moral dimensions of the environment and then upon tailoring one's

actions to it. Moral expertise develops from the habitual marriage of perception and action and the integration of these habits into one's moral identity.

Extending this line of thinking, we propose a theory of moral expertise based on the concept of *habitus*, borrowed from Thomistic philosophy. We argue that moral beliefs are made central through action; acting on beliefs affects how we see ourselves and concomitantly strengthens those beliefs, increasing the likelihood that we will repeat them. The pattern of action that results (the *habitus*) becomes the basis for personal dispositions that form part of moral identity. As personal dispositions become integrated into moral identity, they foster moral expertise, characterized by deeper and better-integrated moral knowledge, a keener grasp of which actions are appropriate to a given situation, and faster and more nuanced moral responses.

While overtly similar to the ideas of Darcia Narvaez et al. (e.g., Narvaez, 2005; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008; Narvaez et al., 2010), our model extends hers in two critical ways: (1) we take a molar view of human moral activity wherein the situated, embodied, and ideographic nature of moral judgments comprises the essential elements of a moral form (Johnson, 2013). Moral identity represents a fundamental component of the self (expressed in both moral judgments and moral actions) that includes social and

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cognitive elements, but adds to them a configuration of dynamic elements that include character, motivation, and meaning. Narvaez's (2005) model, by contrast, retains a more limited (and limiting) focus on the moral schemas that develop from situation–trait interactions; (2) like Narvaez (2005), we maintain that repeated actions may become habitual, leading to sustained changes that do not require conscious attention to maintain. However, to her “push” model of moral expertise (wherein moral actions are driven by prior experiences and judgments), we add a “pull” element focusing on the role of striving toward self-ideals. Finally, in the course of this discussion, we refer to *action* rather than *behavior*. This is an important distinction. *Behavior* reflects an organism's response to environmental demands. *Actions*, by contrast, have goals, embody meaning, and entail accountability (Klöckner, Matthies, & Hunecke, 2003).

2. Theory

2.1. Moral intuitions v. moral expertise

Recent theories of moral judgment have emphasized the primacy of intuition and non-conscious processing in shaping responses to moral situations (Cushman, Murray, Gordon-McKeon, Wharton, & Greene, 2012; Greene & Haidt, 2002; Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004; Haidt, 2001; Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Jayawickreme & Chemero, 2008; Shenhav & Greene, 2010; Slovic & Västfäll, 2010). Within this model (known collectively as the Social Intuitionism Model or SIM), moral judgments are defined as a species of social behavior, with moral intuitions (in the form of rapid, non-conscious cognition) directly causing moral judgments without requiring recourse to conscious moral reasoning (Greene & Haidt, 2002). The SIM emphasizes the rapidity of moral responding, the frequent inability of actors to justify their moral judgments, and the susceptibility of moral judgments to unrelated environmental factors as evidence of their non-conscious origins. Furthermore, according to the SIM, the traits involved in moral responding are innate and, as such, largely insensitive to environmental influences (Suhler & Churchland, 2011).

In their response to the central claims of the SIM, Suhler and Churchland (2011) have argued that claims of innateness must be carefully evaluated when applied to moral contexts. Specifically, they criticize the concept of innateness at the core of the SIM as overly inclusive, allowing nearly any trait to be regarded as “innate.” They base their criticism on the claim made by Haidt and others that the ease and speed of norm acquisition in moral behavior demonstrates “organization in advance of experience,” a hallmark of innateness. They point out that the ease or speed of skill acquisition is not a reliable indicator of innateness, since humans learn many skills easily and quickly. Other criticisms of SIM theories have cited an imprecise definition of cognitive modularity (Suhler & Churchland, 2011), inconsistencies between the claims of the theory and recent findings in both cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary psychology (Suhler & Churchland,

2011), and a confusion of cultural norms with virtue (Narvaez, 2008, 2010) as reasons to be circumspect.

If innate moral modules do not offer a complete explanation of moral functioning then how are we to understand the rapid, apparently non-conscious nature of moral responding? It seems likely that complex processes like moral responding involve both conscious consideration of potential actions and non-conscious re-actions based on existing traits. In fact, the claim that conscious and non-conscious processes work together in moral functioning gains convergent support from dual process models of social cognition (e.g., Barnard & Teasdale, 1991; Epstein, 1994; Fazio & Olson, 2003; Kruglanski & Orehek, 2007). Dual-process cognitive models examine how seemingly automatic processes interact with consciously accessible, rule-based processes. They distinguish between relatively slow, deliberative, usually explicit processes and faster, more intuitive, implicit ones (Usoof-Thowfeek, Janoff-Bulman, & Tavernini, 2010). Joshua Greene et al. (Greene, 2007; Greene et al., 2004) provide a helpful model here, demonstrating that both cognitive and emotional factors are involved in moral decisions, with prepotent emotional reactions vying with utilitarian reasoning for control of moral actions.

A dual-process model of moral functioning would, then, include both an examination of the seemingly automatic responses to moral situations and of the role of conscious, often rule-based reasoning. As Baumeister, Masicampo, and Vohs (2011) note, conscious causation plays a profound and extensive role in stimulating action across a range of tasks and topics. But (and this is important for our thesis), *the effects of consciousness are often indirect and depend on its interaction with non-conscious processes*. Indeed, conscious evaluation is particularly useful for dealing with social and cultural information and for managing competing impulses and desires, both conscious and non-conscious. As Wilson, Lindsey, and Schooler (2000) observed, people often have competing evaluations of the same belief, attitude, or person, with one evaluation being more accessible than another. For example, a non-consciousness liking for a student might lead us to spend an inordinate time with him or her to the exclusion of others with equal or prior claims on our time. The conscious evaluation of these two competing motivations would, at best, lead to a prudential decision to allocate our time more fairly and appropriately.

2.1.1. The development of moral expertise

Another way to explain the evidence that moral responding occurs too quickly for conscious control is to define it as a species of habit (Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007; Klöckner et al., 2003; Narvaez, 2010; de St. Aubin, 1996). According to these authors, moral responding results from ingrained, habitual patterns of response. Such responding is not innate in the traditional sense of that word, instead deriving from patterns of responding, which are learned and that become, over time, second nature, operating so quickly and seamlessly as to appear intuitive. As Narvaez (2010) would have it, deliberate moral practices may become intuitive habits, developing from long practice, but appearing automatic in their

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