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The prospects for a personality-based perspective on morality

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Character:

The prospects for a personality-based perspective on morality

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In the early parts of the 20th Century, *character* made up a major part of psychology, specifically of personality psychology. However, an influential observational study of children's moral behavior, conducted by Hartshorne, May, and colleagues in the 1920's, suggested that consistency in morality-related behavior was lower than many people expected. Some psychologists interpreted such results to mean that there was no consistency in moral behavior, and thus that there were no stable, meaningful individual differences in moral behavior – character did not exist. Recent years have witnessed a reinvigoration of character, ethics, and morality as objects of psychological study. Our purpose in this paper is to contribute to this reinvigoration by reviewing the use of the concept of “character” within psychology, considering whether the evidence supports the notion of moral character as a psychological construct, and suggesting new prospects for research on moral character.

Character: The prospects for a personality-based perspective on morality

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the promise of a personality-based approach to the study of moral (ethical) behavior, and to its opposite – immoral behavior. That is, our goal is to articulate and evaluate the added unique value a personality approach can bring to the study of moral behavior. We will present a conceptual foundation for such an approach, and we will examine fundamental empirical evidence bearing on the value of such an approach.

We believe there are at least three reasons to investigate morality from a personality perspective. First, the question of what drives and determines moral behavior has occupied thinkers for thousands of years, originally in the field of philosophy, relatively recently in psychology and other fields, and at the very beginning of personality psychology. The question of what makes a person behave honestly, fairly, or compassionately, among similar behaviors, has most recently exploded in social psychology, where the main interest is in determining the situational forces that affect morality. However, we propose that much of morality and ethical behavior also may be based on long-standing psychological characteristics that exist within individual persons and on which individuals differ (Hill & Roberts, 2010; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009). For example, on characteristics such as ideologies, traits, or abiding values, each of which is hard to manipulate in a short-term experiment. A personality approach would investigate those sorts of variables, focusing in particular on whether people differ in morality, how much people differ, how moral characteristics manifest themselves in peoples' lives, what is the content of moral personality characteristics, and how such characteristics function. However, the very claim that morality is contained to any

degree within people has been challenged, especially in philosophical investigations of morality. The nature or existence of individual differences in morality has implications for fundamental questions such as “What is the best ethical theory? Do people differ in their degree of morality?” What are the characteristics of people that have the most impact on the morality of their actions?”.

A second reason to study morality from a personality perspective is that the fields of moral and/or social cognition require it, and are, in fact, incomplete without it. The construct of character is powerfully and perhaps inextricably ingrained in the way people think about and evaluate themselves and others. A belief in enduring character traits is at the heart of much of social life: What purpose would job interviews, first dates, personal recommendations, social reputations, and virtually any other conduit of information about “what a person is like” serve if people did not fundamentally believe in the notion of character? Indeed, recent evidence suggests that assessments of moral character, more than assessments of competence and warmth, are central to social inference and evaluation (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, in press) and comprise the core of naïve notions of personal identity (Strohinger, 2013). Thus, it is crucial for psychological scientists to explore the validity and accuracy of these perceptions and judgments in order to “square” our claims about human morality (namely, the causes of moral and immoral behavior) with people’s intuitive understanding of the social world.

A third reason to study morality from a personality-perspective is to bring in a wide array of techniques to the study of morality. Although each of the methods is used in many fields, personality psychologists are unique in the diverse toolbox of methodological approaches they bring to bear (e.g., Robins, Fraley, & Krueger, 2007). This diverse toolkit would be ideal for investigating the enduring patterns of moral

thought, action, and motivation that reside within a given moral agent, and includes experience-sampling, informant reports, trait assessment, behavioral assessment, cognitive measurement, physiological assessment, and implicit measures. This diverse toolkit may reveal new insights about morality.

Character and Other Morality-Related Personality Characteristics

In this paper we argue for a return to the study of moral character. We define personality characteristics as characteristics that individuals have, usually or at least potentially differ on, result from an individual's specific history or biological makeup, are enduring over at least some time, and are relevant to an individual's actions, cognitions, emotions, or motivations. When they are relevant to character, these characteristics are those that have to do with right and wrong, as defined by moral principles.

Because the term "character" is, or has been, used to encompass a variety of individual differences, we begin this paper by reviewing the uses of the word "character" in the psychological literature. Because "character" is a broad term, such a review also situates individual differences in morality relative to other evaluative individual differences and to personality in general.

"Character" has been used in at least six classes of ways, as organized in Figure 1. One important distinction in the uses of character is between character as equivalent to personality in general (Class 1) and character as personality evaluated.

Definitions that equate "character" to "personality" conceive of character as the collection of characteristics on which people differ and which determine or describe individuals' actions, cognitions, motivations, and emotions (American Psychiatric Association, 1980; Hollingworth, 1922; Leonard, 1998; Platt, 1921; Prince, 1921). The

early dates on some of these references may suggest that this definition is the most intuitive one, but the early dates also may reflect a move away from the term “character” in later mainstream personality psychology. Some broad definitions exclude intelligence (Roback, 1927), biological characteristics (Sperry, 1997), or innate characteristics (Prince, 1921) in order to hone in on subtle meanings of character. According to this definition, the study of character adds nearly nothing to the study of personality because it is more or less the same thing. Although we do not accept this definition, we note that it expresses the intimate connection of personality in general to character.

The remaining definitions emphasize the evaluative aspect of “character”. These definitions select out for investigation a subset of personality characteristics that have interest because of their evaluative significance. Different definitions of character differ in which evaluation they emphasize and therefore in which subset of characteristics they select out for study. Because the selected characteristics have evaluative significance, individuals can be said to have better or worse character based on their standing on the selected characteristics (unlike the first definition, which does not consider any given character better than any other). The study of character then becomes the study of that subset of personality characteristics. Technically, the study of character could proceed without the term “character” – the use of the term essentially serves as a guide to locating and emphasizing certain personality characteristics over others. Without the guide to selection, the study might be less efficient and less cumulative.

Two such classes of definitions of character select out characteristics relevant to morality. They differ in which aspect of morality they emphasize: the degree to which a person actually exhibits behaviors that are considered to be moral (Class 2), or the degree to which a person is able to successfully act on his values, moral intentions, goals

and desires (Class 3). Class 2 defines “character” as those characteristics that are descriptive of actions, cognitions, emotions, and motivations that are considered to be relevant to right and wrong according to a relevant moral standard (Allport, 1937; Blasi, 2005; Hogan, 1973)¹. Note that the evaluation is not only of what people do behaviorally, but also of the morality of their emotions, of their thoughts, and of their motivations. All four of these psychological modes have been argued as the basis of evaluation of a person’s character. Thus, in this definition, a person has good character if his or her actions, cognitions, emotions, and/or motivations are right as judged against moral standards.²

Class 3 definitions select out characteristics that are descriptive of actions that are conducive to successfully acting on one’s values, moral intentions, goals, and desires, however those intentions, goals, and desires are defined by the individual. In these definitions, a moral intention’s content is less relevant than is the individual’s ability to carry out that intention. For example, grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly), self-control (Eysenck, 1947), emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), readiness of behavior (Filter, 1922), and morally-relevant self-regulation skills (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999) are characteristics that allow individuals to enact their moral

¹ Whole trait theory (Fleeson, 2012) proposes that traits (characteristics) are descriptive of actions, cognitions, emotions, and motivations, but also consist of explanatory machinery that causes those actions, cognitions, emotions, and motivations. We are using this sense of characteristics here, although do not have the space to elaborate. The key to this paper is that the particular actions, cognitions, emotions, and motivations that are described is the criterion for selecting characteristics.

² For example, we may use the following moral principle (known as act utilitarianism). An action is right if it follows a principle of action that maximizes utility. Thus, honest actions would be considered to be moral because they follow a principle of action (honesty) that maximizes utility (if people act in honest ways, utility for all will be maximized). However, we acknowledge that some researchers may wish to use other moral principles.

ends regardless of the specific content of those ends. Thus, people have “good character” when they are able to instantiate their morals.

Class 4 definitions select out characteristics that are descriptive of actions considered to be strengths. This class is evaluative, but the evaluation is not necessarily moral, and the strengths are not restricted to right and wrong. For example, Peterson and Seligman (2004) surveyed historical, religious, and cultural material to identify six potentially universal strengths: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperament, and transcendence. On this account, strengths are universal traits possibly grounded in biology through an evolutionary process that selects the best traits for solving the most important tasks at hand (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Similarly, Cloninger, Svrakic, and Przybeck (1993) singled out self-directedness, cooperativeness, and self-transcendence as character traits. People are said to have good character when they have such strengths.

The fifth class of definitions is adopted by some psychologists and non-psychologists who select out traits that describe actions that conform to social norms or expectations. For example, children might be said to have good character if they are well-behaved and obedient, employees might be said to have good character if they do not assert their unique creative expressions, and athletes might be said to have good character if they act as role models of politeness and calm. The characteristics that are selected to be part of character are those characteristics that make the individual useful to authorities or other agents of a society or power structure. These would include characteristics such as obedience, low self-expression, and compliance. This definition may be sensitive more to the needs of authority figures or of society rather than to scientific interest in character. We include this definition because some have used it,

particularly non-psychologists, and we wish to contrast it with the other more useful definitions for scientific study.

The sixth and final class of definitions of character selects social deviations, or weaknesses of character rather than strengths. In this class, character results from breakdowns, maladaptations, eccentricities, or other deviations from the norm, and is part of a clinical account of individuals (e.g., Cloninger et al., 1993). Specific characteristics that are considered to be deviations or weaknesses are selected, and individuals' levels of character are the degree to which they have those characteristics. This class is represented by the phrase "quite a character".

Proposal: Character as the Degree to Which a Person is Moral (Class 2)

We propose defining "character" as in the 2nd, moral evaluation, class. We define "character" as those characteristics that are descriptive of actions, cognitions, emotions, and motivations that are considered to be relevant to right and wrong according to a relevant moral standard. The study of morality is important, but most of the study is occurring in social, developmental, and other fields (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009). By studying moral actions, cognitions, emotions, and motivations from a personality perspective, we think researchers can shed new light on the causes of morality and immorality.

We see the selection, study, and refinement of the characteristics in this class as a progressive and iterative series of steps. As a first step, we propose selecting the characteristics that are commonly considered to be moral and that describe behaviors currently studied in moral psychology. For example, topics such as fairness, honesty, and compassion have received a great deal of attention in the psychological literature. These behaviors have been studied mostly from a situationist point of view, and we

propose studying them as dispositions. In the second step, researchers would begin by testing for reliable individual differences in the tendency to act fairly, honestly, or compassionately. To the extent that such individual differences exist, researchers would explore the operations, causes, and consequences of such characteristics. A research program that effectively accomplished these tasks would be sufficient for a strong study of character. If this were as far as the study of character proceeded, it would be a success.

However, we think that the study of moral character can eventually go further than this. The third step would involve refining these moral characteristics by evaluating actions, cognitions, emotions, and motivations in conjunction with each other. For example, an act of honesty could potentially be rejected as moral if the motives for the act of honesty (e.g., only to hurt someone's feelings or to cause an argument) undermined the moral value of the action (Batson, 2011). Considering the motives for the action in conjunction with the beliefs about the action and the motivations of the action may lead to a more refined understanding of honesty in its moral relevance. That is, the trait being studied would shift from honesty per se, but honesty done with morally correct motivations, beliefs, and emotions. The same would be done with other moral traits such as compassion and fairness.

In the final step, researchers would examine whether these refined characteristics are viable as individual differences – are they accurate reflections of the psychological structure of personality, or only reifications placed on behaviors from the outside. For example, the refined concept of honesty done with morally correct motivations may or may not turn out to accurately reflect the psychological nature of honesty. If research supports the existence of these refined characteristics, researchers would study their

operations, causes, and consequences, otherwise character would continue to make significant progress in the first two steps. We expect that moral deliberations are important to people in their action selection, so we believe that such characteristics might turn out to be viable.

Throughout this process, researchers would have to remain open to reconsideration of the criteria used to judge the morality of actions and traits. Particularly at later stages, when the understanding of moral characteristics would be refined, this would likely involve an interdisciplinary effort in which philosophers and psychologists would work together closely to stipulate conditions under which actions or personality characteristics “count” as moral. We see this need for interdisciplinary cooperation as a great potential of the study of character.

We acknowledge we are not providing a complete set of dispositions that we think should comprise a definition of moral character. Here we follow Hill and Roberts (2010) in arguing that there are a variety of moral traits. Further, we think the goal of any empirical study of character should be to make progress on the definitional issue. By analogy, consider the study of psychopathology. Clinical psychologists continue to make great strides toward refining the diagnostic criteria for various psychiatric disorders based upon relevant empirical findings. This is true of research on traits, motives, and values, as well. And we think it will likely be true for moral character: The more research can advance our understanding of the factors that give rise to moral/immoral behavior, the more our conceptual understanding of morality will evolve.

The Class 2 definition of character selects a set of characteristics to study because of a judgment that those characteristics are important. This judgment does not imply that character dispositions are necessarily fundamentally different from other

dispositions in some structure or process feature. Rather, we are proposing this definition of character as a selector of dispositions that are of particular interest. They are of interest because of their widespread impact across disciplines and their relevance to interpersonal interaction. Like the selection of dispositions based on their health impact (e.g., studying conscientiousness because of its impact on longevity), we are proposing the selection of dispositions based on their moral impact. In the end, we are proposing the study of the dispositions themselves, not the evaluation or judgment of them (although the study of moral judgment is also interesting, e.g., Goodwin et al., in press). Any empirical information discovered about these dispositions will still be of theoretical and practical importance even if the judgment about the morality of the dispositions changes.

At the same time, we believe that considerations about morality weigh heavily in the internal workings of character. We believe that people often deliberate intensely on the moral implications of their actions, so it is likely that these dispositions will have unique features (Batson, 2011). For example, watching the films of the Asch (1956) and Milgram (1974) studies reveals the intensity with which people deliberate about moral dilemmas. The recent discovery of identification with all humanity (McFarland, Webb, & Brown, 2012) and guilt-proneness (Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011) as factors in morality show that identity and emotions may operate in special ways in character dispositions. Thus, it very well may turn out that character dispositions are internally different from other dispositions. This is an important direction for future research.

Does the Empirical Evidence Support the Role of Personality in Morally-Relevant Behavior?

In the early days of personality psychology, character was a central topic of study.

The Hartshorne and May study from 1928 is still perhaps the largest study of personality conducted, and it was on the subject of character. However, the study of character in personality largely withered after this (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009). One major reason for the decline of the study of character was the received interpretation of the Hartshorne & May studies, which was that character traits do not exist (e.g., Cervone & Tripathi, 2009). Because we are arguing for the study of character, it is important to evaluate the empirical evidence against and for the viability of character.

The current situationist challenge against moral character originally stems from the controversy over traits in the personality psychology literature in the late 1920's. In these studies, the ability of traits to consistently predict people's behavior was questioned. In their landmark study, Hartshorne and May (1928) found that among 10 to 12-year old children, correlations between single honesty/cheating behaviors of one type (e.g., cheating on an academic test) and single honesty/cheating behaviors of another type (e.g., cheating at a game) were lower than they expected (averages around .20). These low correlations suggested that one can predict, e.g., which children will cheat at a game of pin the tail on the donkey from knowing which children cheated on an academic test, but the predictions will be wrong fairly often.

In response to these findings, moral psychology shifted its focus drastically away from a personality approach. First, psychologists ceased in their search for stability of moral behaviors, and turned their attention to the development of moral cognition (Kohlberg, 1969). When in the 1960s and 1970s psychologists returned to the study of moral behavior, their aim was to demonstrate the power that social situations held over people's moral decision making. A parade of studies followed. Studies by Milgram (1974) showed that ordinary people could act in uncharacteristically callous ways if told

to do so by an authority figure. Darley and Batson (1973) showed that situational demands could override a person's personal values in deciding whether to help a victim

The situationist tradition continues to guide the study of moral psychology today, and such efforts have been fruitful -- research continues to amass evidence for the power that situations have on moral decision-making and behavior. For example, the incidental elicitation of disgust changes the way that people reason about morality (Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008), as does the transient experience of physical purity (Helzer & Pizarro, 2011; Zhong, Strejcek, & Sivanathan, 2010). The lighting of a room or sensations of physical warmth can make people more or less prosocial in evaluation and action (Chiou & Chang, 2013; Williams & Bargh, 2008).

What's more, researchers have successfully shown that prosocial tendencies can be amplified or dampened by slight changes in decision-maker's mindset. Experimental instructions to take another person's perspective during one phase of an experiment can make people more likely to cooperate with that person in a second phase of the experiment (Batson & Moran, 1999). Temporary activation of interdependent vs. independent mindsets can affect decisions to cooperate (Utz, 2004). And the psychological distance one feels from a behavior can make people more likely to act on either pro-social or egoistic motives (Giacomantonio, De Dreu, Shalvi, Sligte, & Leder, 2010).

This collection of research has inspired scholars from different fields to endorse situationism as the rule when it comes to understanding the causes of moral thought and behavior; in essence conceptualizing morality as a product of transient and impersonal social-psychological forces. As one illustration, a recent group of philosophers has interpreted research in the social and personality psychology literature

as evidence against the existence of broad character traits, thus rendering their study pointless (Doris, 1998, 2002; Harman, 1999). For example Harman (1999; 2009) has gone so far as to argue that “there is no empirical basis for the existence of character traits” (p. 1) and has claimed that prominent personality psychologists such as Funder (2001) have accepted the fact that “personality psychology has collapsed as a serious academic subject” (Harman, 2009, p. 237).

Were these claims true, they would have dire consequences for the study of character (and indeed personality in general). It is indeed true that the Hartshorne and May studies marked a shift in psychology insofar that it marked a move away from the person-based perspective on morality that we argue for now. In recent years, personality psychologists have addressed this issue, and can offer at least four robust responses to the claims from situationism. We list these four responses in turn.

Response 1: Hartshorne and May’s Results Are Not Nearly as Damning as Believed

The Hartshorne & May (1928) data that the situationists have cited focus on the relationship between pairs of single actions. It is not clear that low correlations between single actions undermines the notion of broad character traits (Kamtekar, 2004).

Moreover, according to the principle of aggregation (Epstein, 1979), the average of a set of multiple measurements is more stable and unbiased than any single measurement from that set. When this principle is applied to the Hartshorne and May results, robust relationships between moral traits and behavior become apparent (Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981). For example, when the five altruism behavioral tasks used in the study were aggregated and correlated with the child’s altruistic reputation, the correlation was .61 (Hartshorne, May & Maller, 1929). Burton (1963) found a robust general factor of

honesty underlying behavior in the data. In fact, Hartshorne and May themselves concluded that they “are quite ready to recognize the existence of some common factors which tend to make individuals differ from one another on any one test or on any group of tests” (Hartshorne & May, 1928, p. 385).

Response 2: Character Can Be Measured, and Is Related To Personality

Many characteristics relevant to morality are already being studied as individual differences variables, and these characteristics show reliability and validity. Moral foundations theory (Graham, Nosek, Haidt, Iyer, Koleva, & Ditto, 2011), for example, stipulates that differences in moral belief systems stem from individual- or group-level differences in the importance placed on a small set of core moral concerns. People appear to differ from one another on how often their moral schemas are activated (*moral chronicity*, Narvaez, Lapsley, Hagele, & Lasky, 2006), their awareness of morally-relevant information when it is present (*moral sensitivity*, Sparks & Hunt, 1998), and the tendency to proactively search for moral relevance in their experiences (*moral attentiveness*, Reynolds, 2008). The existence of constructs such as moral identity centrality (the degree to which concerns are embedded within one’s self-concept; Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009; Frimer & Walker, 2010) and moral conviction (the strength of one’s moral beliefs, Skitka, 2010) suggest that individual differences in moral character are instantiated within social-cognitive mechanisms, at both implicit and explicit levels.

Furthermore, these characteristics are correlated with the Big 5/HEXACO, which show extensive validity evidence (e.g., Nettle et al., 2010). Matsuba and Walker (2004) found that young adult moral exemplars scored high on agreeableness. Other studies suggest a role for other basic traits. For example, extraversion has been found to relate

to cooperation (Ross, Rausch, & Canada, 2003), and conscientiousness and emotional stability has been shown to relate to helping behavior (King, George, & Hebl, 2005). If these measures have reliability and validity, and relate to other personality characteristics, then there is likely some reality to individual differences in moral behavior.

Response 3: The Effects of Personality on Single Actions are the Same Magnitude as Situational Effects

Funder and Ozer (1982) considered the relative “power” of personality dispositions and situational factors in predicting behavior. They argued that the supposedly-low predictive power of personality dispositions does not necessarily mean that situational factors have great or even greater predictive power. In fact, Funder and Ozer demonstrate that situational effects empirically are more-or-less equivalent to personality effects. Ultimately, they argue that any meaningful psychological attempt to understand human behavior must combine multiple predictors of behavior, as the accurate prediction of single actions from single variables is impossible. Relatedly, Sabini and Silver (2005) argued that the true implication of situationism is not that our characters are heavily influenced by “subtle situational forces,” but that our commonplace dispositions are in many cases helpless in the wake of the powerful pressures such as a resolute authority or a unanimous group of people who see the world differently from us.

Response 4: Behavioral Variability is Real, But Can Be Reconciled Within a Personality Framework

Fleeson (2004) has argued that recent advances in personality psychology show both sides of the person-situation debate were correct; people routinely act in a number

of ways on a given dimension of behavior, but their ranges of behavior are centered on different portions of the dimension, and an individual's center remains very stable over the long-term (correlations on relative positive of central points at different times typically being close to .9). Thus, while people may act very differently in different situations, their typical behavior remains highly consistent from week to week. This resolution of the person-situation debate is premised on a reconceptualization of traits as density distributions of trait-relevant behaviors (Fleeson, 2001).

Putting these concepts together, several researchers have examined the concept of behavioral consistency itself (e.g., Ozer, 1986). Fleeson and Nofle (2009) concluded that there are several different types of consistency, and they argued that behavior is highly consistent in some ways but less so in others. Specifically, at the single-behavior level, behavioral consistency is equal in magnitude to the predictive power of situational factors. But at the average-behavior level, behavior is highly consistent. Examining people's behavior in terms of a *distribution* provides one way to grasp this concept in a single idea: each person has a wide distribution of behaviors, which allows him or her to adjust to the situation, but different people have different locations of their distributions and those locations stay consistent (Fleeson, 2001). Thus, when it comes to single, short-term behaviors (how a person acts for 15 minutes), traits are about as powerful as situations – no more and no less powerful – in determining single behaviors. When it comes to longer-term behaviors (how a person acts for a day), traits are extremely powerful in predicting how a person will act. Slingerland (2011) argued that philosophers have not fully appreciated this resolution psychologists have settled on. What is not yet clear is how well this solution will transfer to morality.

New Prospects for Research on Moral Character

We believe that a personality approach to moral action, cognition, motivation, and emotion represents a promising direction for future research. We predict that the density distributions solution will have traction for moral personality as it did for personality in general. If so, then there will be many potentially fruitful personality-oriented psychological questions to explore in moral character.

Understanding Individual Differences in Moral Character

One set of fundamental questions involves the very existence of stable and meaningful individual differences in the tendency to think, feel, and act in morally relevant ways. Do character traits exhibit properties similar to those of normal personality traits? Given recent research highlighting the effects of contextual factors on moral behavior, to what extent do character traits predict moral cognition, emotions and behavior? Is there evidence, including consistency evidence, for the existence of character traits? If so, then what types of consistency do they exhibit (Fleeson & Nofle, 2009)?

When examining the distribution of morally-relevant behaviors (following Fleeson, 2001), it may turn out that behavior related to morality may differ from behavior related to personality in general. For example, single moral transgressions can be rare and powerful: One act of murder has many more implications than does one act of extraversion. Second, moral behavior may involve a conflict between self-interests and morality interests. Third, self-reports of moral behavior may be less valid than self-reports of general personality-related behavior. Fourth, societal norms about behavior may be more powerful for morality than for personality in general. Thus, it is important to conduct research to test the concept of distributions on morally-relevant behavior. Moreover, future work examining the packages of moral actions, cognitions, emotions,

and motivations that make up moral character traits can build on this research.

Understanding the Mechanisms Constituting Moral Character

A second set of questions involve the psychological nature of character traits. If character traits do stand up to empirical scrutiny, then are they best conceptualized as a few general traits (e.g., such as those in the Big Five), or are they better understood in terms of many highly localized traits? What roles do beliefs, desires, and emotions play in character traits? Do goals and identities have important relationships to character (e.g. Aquino, McFerran, & Laven, 2011)? How much self-regulation can people exert over their character traits at a given moment and over a given period of time? Understanding the relative importance of each of these mechanisms for moral behavior is important for unifying different traditions in moral psychology that emphasize one mechanism over the other (Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008).

Integrating the Person and the Situation into the Study of Moral Character

A third set of issues builds upon the first two and emphasizes general models of character that integrate both character traits and situations in the explanation and prediction of moral behavior. A number of innovative theories in personality (Cervone, 2005; Heller, Perunovic & Reichman, 2008; Fleeson, 2012; Mischel & Shoda, 1995) have attempted to integrate traits and situations into a complete explanation of human behavior. The most optimal model would successfully integrate research in moral psychology highlighting both personological and situational factors (Monin & Jordan, 2009). Certainly, a full resolution of this issue will require an understanding of situations themselves. Additional important directions of research will flow from a personality approach to moral character. For example, how do character traits develop and are certain strategies more effective in cultivating a given character trait than

others? Character development is an important topic within moral psychology, and future research should integrate recent developments in social and personality psychology (Hill & Roberts, 2010). Moreover, attempts to develop and sustain character should be based on an understanding of moral behavior that acknowledges both the role of the person and situations.

Additional important questions will reflect peoples' perceptions and understandings of moral character. For example, do people understand their own character traits, and do they understand other people's character traits? Personality psychologists have addressed such questions for a variety of personality characteristics (Funder, 2001), but not explicitly for character traits. Finally, what new (or old) methods and analytic techniques can best be utilized to reach breakthroughs in the study of character? We believe that focusing on character opens new avenues for future research involving links between persons, situations and behavior. Future research should employ innovation methodologies that capture the links between these constructs. Methods focusing on these links—including self-reports of cognitions, emotions and behavior, experience sampling methodologies (ESM), and behavioral observation (Furr, 2009)— can help researchers achieve breakthroughs in understanding character.

Thus, the potential for a personality-based approach to morality seems promising. The term “character” has a rich conceptual heritage, research on personality in general has produced a solid starting point, many investigators have already begun producing empirical findings about character, evidence suggests that personality could possibly play a role in moral behavior, and there are many fascinating questions about character ready to be addressed.

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Figure 1. Classes of Definitions of Character.

