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Moral Functioning Should Be Self-Regarding

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These are unpublished conference papers for the 'Can Virtue Be Measured?', held by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values at Oriol College, Thursday 9th – Saturday 11th January 2014. These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.

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How can we explain the behavior of people who dedicate decades of their lives in volunteer service to those who are disadvantaged? What about those who tirelessly support social justice, humanitarian, or environmental causes? These extraordinary actions, committed by otherwise ordinary people, intrigue and inspire us precisely because they don't really make any good sense—they are clearly intended to promote others' welfare but seemingly have no benefit for oneself; indeed, they inevitably entail considerable cost, risk, and trouble. So, wherein is the motivation to be moral?

This challenging issue, which scholars in the field of moral development have struggled to resolve without noticeable success, focuses on the source and nature of moral motivation: Why, exactly, should we do good and live rightly? What psychological mechanisms actually engender moral behavior? How best can moral motivation be assessed? These questions are important because they speak to the boundaries of how we conceptualize the moral domain, to the viability of the processes we use to explain moral development and functioning, and to the efficacy of our socialization and intervention efforts.

So what motivates moral behavior? Many theories do not have a ready answer regarding the nature and source of moral motivation because they ignore or disparage the role of the self in moral functioning. This failure is manifest variously: by denigrating notions of character (Kohlberg, 1981), by segregating the personal from the moral domain (Turiel, 1983), by advancing constructs of self-denying altruism and empathy (de Waal, 2009; Hoffman, 2000), and

by defining morality as surmounting selfishness (Haidt, 2008). The implicit (and oft explicit) argument in these theories is that morality should not be self-regarding—it would be unseemly to even countenance that, an apparent contradiction in terms. One’s moral mandate requires overcoming personal interests by engaging in drear duty, onerous obligation, and selfless sacrifice. This all implies that others’ interests are ethically prior to one’s own; that no moral credit accrues in advancing one’s own interests and welfare. Such theories exacerbate the conceptual problem of moral motivation by implicitly positing an inert view.

Flanagan (1991, 2009) has offered a contrary, more eudaimonic perspective: As humans, he contends, we are fittingly partial to our own interests and projects which imbue life with meaning and, indeed, this meaning is integral to, and actually constitutive of, morality. And he further argues, as a form of “reality check,” that ethical theories, to be considered viable and valid, should specify a psychologically realistic motivational mechanism for the actualization of their ideals.

My basic argument, advanced here, is that the synergistic integration of agentic personal interests with communal moral concerns is such a mechanism, one which has motivational force because, once established, morality becomes self-regarding, not merely other-regarding. Under such conditions, acting on moral concerns is self-enhancing, while failing to do so is self-deprecating. Blasi (1983) and Damon (1984) can be credited with foundational arguments along these lines, particularly for advancing the relevance of concepts related to the moral self.

In other words, there should be something significant for one’s self in the enterprise—moral behavior can legitimately be self-enhancing and self-promoting. If that is the case, then there is powerful motivational impetus for doing good and living rightly. The empirical warrant for this conceptual argument has, in my recent program of research, been constructed largely

through the psychological study of moral exemplars, extraordinary people who live out many of our ethical ideals. It may be helpful to provide a rationale for studying moral exemplars, since it is hardly the most expedient approach to research.

Moral Exemplars

Real-world behaviors. Exemplars are recognized, often by social consensus, for engaging in notable moral behaviors. Such behaviors are meaningful, significant, and enacted in the real world; as such, they have considerable face validity. Exemplars have convincingly and consistently engaged in the behaviors of primary interest.

Expands the moral domain. Research on morality has been constrained by various conceptual skews that focus on particular variables as core to the moral domain, thereby ignoring or minimizing other relevant aspects. Kohlberg's (1981) explicit emphasis on justice and moral rationality is illustrative of one such conceptual skew, as is Gilligan's (1982) advocacy for an ethic of care, Hoffman's (2000) focus on empathy, and so on. A helpful corrective to these conceptual skews is to examine the psychological functioning of real people who are exemplars of morality. This approach can draw attention to aspects of moral functioning that may have been previously overlooked.

Ethical ideals. Psychological research with moral exemplars can inform our ethical ideals by indicating what is humanly attainable and what forms they may take. As Flanagan (1991) has argued, moral theory must be grounded in human psychology or else we are condemned to a tyrant's morality.

Extreme groups amplify effects. When the psychological functioning of exemplars is contrasted with that of ordinary folk (or even more strikingly with exemplars of immorality), such comparisons between extreme groups amplify differences and more clearly indicate

operative processes in moral functioning.

Person-level analyses. The study of moral exemplars is the study of persons, and more holistic understandings of moral functioning can be obtained through reliance on within-person analyses. In contrast to the traditional variable-level analytic strategy, a person-level approach examines the phenomenologically real interaction among variables within the person, which is more revelatory of functional psychological dynamics (Magnusson, 2003).

Reverse engineering. A focus on morally mature exemplars represents a research strategy of reverse engineering wherein the fully functioning, finished “product” is obtained and then progressively deconstructed in order to discover its operative mechanisms. In this case, the strategy of reverse engineering entails first understanding the motivational processes implicated in moral maturity and, then, working backwards to discern developmental trajectories and causal factors.

In this section, the case was made for studying moral exemplars. I now turn to the empirical warrant for my core argument—that morality can, and should be, self-regarding.

Synergistic Integration of Agency and Communion

The first suggestive evidence that morality can be self-regarding was reported by Colby and Damon (1992) in their case-study analysis of a small sample of moral exemplars who were involved in social action. They observed that their exemplars seemingly had a coherent identity which meaningfully integrated the personal and moral aspects of their lives. For these exemplars, moral action was purportedly not an exercise in self-sacrifice or the outcome of heady dilemmatic deliberation. Rather, exemplars garnered personal fulfillment from advancing their prosocial projects. Moral concerns and action were endemic to their personality. However, the lack of objective measures and an appropriate comparison group in this qualitative study

leaves the inferences drawn somewhat tenuous.

These limitations were addressed in a study of exemplars conducted by Walker and Frimer (2007). The primary objective of our research was to determine the psychological variables which are characteristic of, and foundational to, mature moral functioning. The research strategy entailed casting a wide net—a comprehensive and broadband assessment of psychological functioning. McAdams (1995) provides a now well-accepted three-level typology of personality description that references dispositional traits (decontextualized behavioral traits), characteristic adaptations (motivational and strategic aspects of personality), and integrative life narratives (the psychosocial construction of an identity). This typology informed the methodology of the research conducted here which entailed several personality inventories and a lengthy individual life-story interview.

Walker and Frimer (2007) recruited a sample of moral exemplars who had received a national award (the Caring Canadian Award) for their extraordinary and long-term volunteer service to individuals, groups, communities, and humanitarian causes. Essentially, they had engaged in a “moral career.” Also recruited was a sample of comparison participants who were matched on a case-by-case basis on a set of four demographic variables.

The results revealed that the caring exemplars were distinguished from the comparison group on many aspects of psychology functioning including: stronger dispositional traits of nurturance, more frequent personal strivings reflecting relational and generative goals, greater optimism pervading their life stories, more frequent redemptive construals of negative life events, stronger intimations of early life advantage (secure attachments, the presence of “helpers” who fostered development, and sensitization to the needs of others), and stronger themes of both agency and communion. The accentuated level of communion among caring

exemplars was anticipated; however, the accentuated level of agency was not.

That both agency and communion appear to be hallmarks of moral exemplarity points to the psychological mechanism of aligning and reconciling the interests of self and other in moral functioning. These themes are also ubiquitous in naturalistic conceptions of moral exemplarity (Hardy, Walker, Olsen, Skalski, & Basinger, 2011; Walker & Hennig, 2004; Walker & Pitts, 1998). Agency and communion are fundamental themes in motivation (Bakan, 1966; McAdams, 1988) where they are often conceptualized as antagonistic and mutually interfering (e.g., Hogan, 1982, describes these motives as “getting ahead” and “getting along,” and Schwartz et al., 2012, place these motives on opposing sides of the values circumplex).

In our view, however, the relationship between these motives can be re-framed developmentally. At some point in development, these motives (which hitherto had been segregated) begin to “butt heads.” This motivational tension can be resolved in a number of ways: the flagging of motivation in general, the attenuation of one motive and the strengthening of the other (resulting in either unmitigated agency or unmitigated communion, both of which are problematic motivational states), or their integration. Thus, one could posit a developmental transition in these motives from being independent and competing to being interdependent and synergistic. The pattern indicating accentuated levels of both agentic and communal motivation in the psychological functioning of moral exemplars is certainly suggestive of their synergistic interaction.

But these strong themes of both agency and communion could simply indicate that exemplars are highly motivated in general. The critical question is whether there is any evidence of a synergistic interaction between these motives in moral maturity, evidence which would bolster the notion that morality can be both self- and other-regarding. In an initial test of this

notion of a synergistic interaction (an effect which is greater than the sum of its parts), Walker and Frimer (2007) examined the relationship between agency and communion in their sample of caring exemplars and comparison participants. As noted before, exemplars evidenced stronger themes of both agency and communion than did comparison participants. In our analysis, however, once levels of agency and communion were accounted for, there was no evidence of a statistical interaction between the variables, failing to support the notion of synergy.

Not to be thwarted, however, Frimer, Walker, Dunlop, Lee, and Riches (2011) revisited the issue with the same dataset, introducing three refinements. First, they introduced a conceptual clarification of the meaning of agency and communion (Walker & Frimer, 2007, had relied on McAdams's, 2001, operationalization of these two types of motivation, each of which entailed mixed definitional schemes). Many definitions of these motives abound with considerable variability (Paulhus & Trapnell, 2008), so definitions were adopted that were more in accord with our own theorizing, with agency framed as self-promoting (motives of power and achievement) and communion as other-promoting (motives of benevolence and universalism). A contrasting definition, for example, focuses more on psychological distance, with agency reflected by individuation and communion by relatedness.

Second, Frimer et al. (2011) developed a corresponding coding system, Values Embedded in Narrative (VEiNs), to better assess agentic and communal motives as conceptualized here. Rather than the macroanalytic coding system devised by McAdams (2001), the VEiN approach entailed coding at a microanalytic level and was based on Schwartz's (1992) typology of 10 universal values, with the two values of power and achievement reflecting agency (self-enhancement) and with the two values of benevolence and universalism reflecting communion (self-transcendence). And not only was the frequency of concepts reflecting each

motive coded, but also coded was the frequency of compatible relationships between motives.

Third, Frimer et al. (2011) introduced an analytical refinement in conducting a person-level analysis rather than the traditional variable-level analysis. In a variable-level analysis (as was conducted by Walker & Frimer, 2007), an interaction can be detected based on the overall strength of the variables (even if the individual vacillates between the motives and keeps them segregated); in contrast, in a person-level analysis (Magnusson, 2003), an interaction is detected based on the phenomenologically real co-occurrence of the motives within the person, within the same thought structure.

When these three refinements (conceptual, coding, and analytical) were implemented, the moral exemplars not only evidenced the accentuated levels of agency and communion reported earlier, but also the synergistic interaction between these two motives. In contrast, in the comparison group, the level of integration found did not differ from what would be expected on the basis of chance. Herein is the first compelling evidence of the adaptive and synergistic integration of self-enhancing agency and self-transcending communion in moral maturity.

Although Frimer et al.'s (2011) study provided evidence of the integration of agency and communion in moral functioning, an ambiguity remains. That study assessed the co-occurrence of these motives within the individual's thinking on a topic; it did not indicate the directionality between these motives. For example, the co-occurrence of these motives could be of the form of agency promoting communion (e.g., "I'm trying to use my social position to help the poor") or of the form of communion promoting agency (e.g., "I'm involved with this prosocial cause to bolster my social status"). Obviously, different moral credit would be assigned to these two forms. Rokeach (1973) introduced a distinction between instrumental and terminal values. An instrumental value is a means to something else, whereas a terminal value is an end in itself. So,

in the example above (“I’m trying to use my social position to help the poor”), the value of one’s social position is expressed as being instrumental to the ultimate goal of helping the poor.

Frimer, Walker, Lee, Riches, and Dunlop (2012) examined the hierarchical integration of agency and communion in moral motivation by assessing their instrumental–terminal relationship. A different approach to identifying moral exemplars was taken in this study. Rather than recruiting award recipients for extraordinary moral action, for example, their target subjects were highly influential people of the 20th century, as identified by TIME magazine at the turn of the millennium. These are the world’s most influential leaders, revolutionaries, heroes, and icons; people who have had enormous impact, both positive and negative.

In the first step of their procedure, Frimer et al. (2012) had a large sample of experts (viz., Canadian social scientists) rate these target figures on dimensions of moral exemplarity, relying on Colby and Damon’s (1992) five criteria for moral excellence: principled/virtuous, consistent, brave, inspiring, and humble. The top-ranking of these figures, based on an overall index of these dimensions, were thus classified as moral exemplars and included such luminaries as Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, Mother Teresa, and Andrei Sakharov. The bottom-ranking of these figures comprised the comparison group of similar influence and included familiar names such as Kim Jong Il, Vladimir Putin, Adolf Hitler, and Marilyn Monroe. The comparison group was a motley one of political leaders, celebrity icons, and athletes, all of some notoriety and all adjudged as not being particularly prototypic of moral excellence.

Obviously, these influential figures were not available for direct participation in research, so their motivational functioning was assessed “at a distance” by systematic content analyses of archival materials (speeches and interviews). Excerpts from these speeches and interviews were first coded for concepts of agency (power, achievement) and communion (benevolence,

communion), and then the hierarchical relationship between these motives was assessed by determining which concepts were instrumental to (as a means to) each terminal value (expressed as an end in itself).

The results of these analyses can be encapsulated simply: Comparison figures expressed considerably more agency than communion at both the instrumental and terminal levels—an unequivocal expression of unmitigated agency. Moral exemplar figures also expressed considerably more agency than communion at the instrumental level; these are highly impactful people, after all. But at the terminal level, communion was indomitable. Exemplars used their agency in promotion of communal causes—the embodiment of enlightened self-regard. This is a perfect illustration of the appropriation of morality to the self, the moral motivational mechanism advanced in this paper. Morality becomes integral to one’s psychological functioning such that personal influence and achievement are fulfilled, and meaning is imparted to life, in an integrated style of motivation by furthering others’ welfare.

Conclusion

When morality is framed, as is typical, as an exercise in drear duty, onerous obligation, and selfless sacrifice, it lacks adequate motivational impetus, regardless of the exalted nature of its ethical ideals. Many theories denigrate the role of the self in moral motivation, arguing that virtue entails developing the ability to somehow suppress self-interest in order to do the right thing. In my view, this framing of moral functioning is psychologically quixotic and untenable.

My contention is that morality should not only be other-regarding, but it can and should also be self-regarding (in the eudaimonic sense). Such a transformation of moral motivation can be keenly motivating “for creatures like us” (Flanagan, 1991, p. 31). As moral agents, we can capitalize on the power of self-interest by refocusing it so that the self has a meaningful stake in

moral action. When moral concerns become core to identity and motivation, then their pursuit is enhancing to the self.

In this paper, research was reviewed that, collectively, provides the empirical warrant for the claim that self-promoting agentic motivation is integrated with other-promoting communal motivation in the moral functioning of exemplars. Having demonstrated this motivational mechanism in maturity (the “finished product”), however, begs the next steps in the process of reverse engineering. What are the typical developmental trajectories in moral motivation? And what are the psychological mechanisms that effect divergent trajectories (integration, unmitigated agency, unmitigated communion, continued segregation, or diminished motivation)? How do each of these various trajectories relate to moral behavior? What is the nature of motivational crisis-points and their manifestation; and how are they typically stoked and resolved? What are the cognitive understandings that contribute to transformations in moral motivation? How do aspects of early socialization of agency and communion (through parenting, community, media, and broader cultural values) influence their developing relationship in adolescence and adulthood? What are the adaptive and maladaptive forms of moral motivation (e.g., pathological altruism) and how can their development best be explained? What are the costs, to both self and others, for engaging in an exemplary moral career? Does it have its shadow-side to which we should be aware?

Once causal mechanisms and developmental trajectories in moral motivation have been clarified, then the next step in the process of reverse engineering is to implement and assess intervention efforts. As the adage goes (attributed to Kurt Lewin), “If you want truly to understand something, try to change it.”

Author Note

Funding for the research reported here was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Some of the material presented in this conference paper is adapted from Walker (in press).

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