

THE CHARACTER OF MORAL EXEMPLARS

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My sense of contemporary moral psychology – a field of research that has been my interest for all of my scholarly career – is that it has provided rich understandings regarding the development of moral reasoning, but has been relatively impoverished in terms of its appreciation of moral personality and character. This rather barren conception of moral

functioning has, not surprisingly, often failed to provide effective means by which to foster children's moral development.

The basic goal of my recent research is to formulate a more balanced account of moral functioning that meaningfully integrates moral cognition with moral character and action – a research direction that I will illustrate today through the study of moral exemplarity. It is important to keep in mind that moral functioning is inherently multifaceted, involving the dynamic interplay of thought, emotions, and behavior; and that we trivialize morality if we focus exclusively on one component. I believe that the study of exemplary moral character has the potential to encompass the various cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of moral functioning, as well as to address the different domains of moral concern, that is, both our relationships with others and the personal development of our values, lifestyle, and identity.

What I am pursuing in my own research is a two-pronged approach to developing such an integrated account of moral functioning: One approach examines people's ordinary conceptions of moral exemplarity; the other examines the psychological functioning of actual moral exemplars, people who have been identified as leading lives of moral virtue, integrity, and commitment. These different empirical strategies should be mutually informative, providing convergent evidence regarding aspects of moral functioning that are significant in everyday life and that should be incorporated into both our theories of moral development and our approaches to character education.

Let me begin by describing my research on people's conceptions of moral excellence (Walker & Pitts, 1998). People's ordinary conceptions of morality can provide a healthy corrective to the conceptual biases that sometimes distort our perspectives and they can help to draw attention to aspects of morality that have been sidelined in our theories. This research

entailed a sequence of three studies in which participants generated lists of attributes characteristic of a highly moral person, rated how characteristic these attributes were, and then freely sorted these attributes into groups – a process which allowed us, through various statistical techniques, to derive typologies that reflect people’s implicit understandings.

Analyses identified two dimensions underlying people’s understanding of moral exemplarity: one I labeled a self–other dimension, the other an external–internal dimension. At one end of the self–other dimension are traits that emphasize personal agency and commitment, whereas at the other end are traits that focus more on care for others. Of course, the range of these moral virtues means that they are sometimes in tension. For example, strongly held moral values need to be balanced by an openness to new perspectives and a sensitivity to the circumstances of others. Similarly, the external–internal dimension reflects the fact that morality involves an orientation both to shared moral norms and to the carefully considered principles of one’s own conscience. On a related note, it is important to recognize that many virtues may be taken to excess and have maladaptive aspects to their expression in some contexts. For example, self-sacrificial care can be destructive when it involves self-denigration and over-involvement in others’ lives.

Analyses also identified several clusters of attributes in people’s understanding of moral exemplarity that have been inadequately represented in moral psychology and that now warrant more careful attention, such as the notion of integrity, for example. There is, however, one questionable implication from this research that should be flagged and that is whether there is a single prototype for moral excellence. This collection may represent an amalgamation of virtues that would be impossible, indeed incoherent, for any one person to embody. At present, we have little understanding of how these aspects of moral character interact in psychological functioning.

In any case, the suggestion pursued here is that moral exemplarity can be evidenced in quite divergent ways – think, for example, of moral heroes such as Martin Luther King Jr. in his pursuit of justice or Mother Teresa in her selfless care for the disadvantaged or Oskar Schindler in his brave protection of Jews during the Holocaust. Here the critical question is: What traits are common across different types of moral exemplarity and what traits are unique to each? So in this next project (Walker & Hennig, 2002), we explored conceptions of three types of moral exemplarity – just, brave, and caring. As in the previous project, this entailed a sequence of three studies which in the end allowed us to identify typologies in people’s understanding.

Our analyses revealed rather dissimilar personality profiles for these different types of moral exemplars. The brave exemplar was associated with traits of agency and self-sacrifice; the caring exemplar was associated with traits of nurturance and altruism; whereas the just exemplar was typified by conscientiousness, stability, and openness. Yet, many traits were found to be common to all – what we could consider suggestive of the core of moral functioning. Among these core traits were honesty, dependability, and self-control; as well as many traits of an interpersonal nature that reflect an other-oriented orientation. Other themes included personal agency, positivity, emotional stability, and openness. These common features are clearly foundational for moral functioning and warrant further conceptual and empirical scrutiny.

The major limitation to the study of conceptions of moral functioning is that it simply describes people’s understandings, not the actual psychological functioning of real moral exemplars. So in another research project currently underway, I am examining the personalities, through extensive interviews and several questionnaire measures, of two contrasting types of moral exemplars: exceptionally brave versus caring people. The sample is composed of Canadians who have received national awards in recognition of either their acts of bravery in

risking their lives to save others or for their extraordinary care to individuals, groups, or communities, or their support for humanitarian causes. For example, among the recipients of the award for bravery was a woman who at considerable danger to herself saved a young girl from a vicious cougar attack; and among the recipients of the award for care was a police officer who, in his off-duty time, developed a program to buy and deliver Christmas gifts for disadvantaged children in remote communities. These are the types of people who have made a real difference in the lives of others, who have given selflessly of themselves in aid of others and their communities.

It is anticipated that the eventual findings of this research project will yield a more comprehensive understanding of moral functioning that integrates cognition, personality, and action. Once the field has some sense of the psychological functioning of moral exemplars, then the agenda can focus on the formative factors in the development of such exemplary moral character and on programs to foster it. Certainly, there are many possibilities to consider as we chart new directions in moral psychology and character education.

References

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