Moral Personality, Generativity, and the Redemptive Self

Dan P. McAdams

Northwestern University

What is a moral personality? The question implicitly assumes an answer to a more general question: What is *personality*? Since the time of Gordon Allport (1937), personality psychologists have struggled with this basic definitional question. Traditionally, answers have been framed in the largely irreconcilable terms of the *grand theories* of personality developed in the middle years of the 20th century (e.g., Hall & Lindzey, 1957). The grand theories divided the field into opposing camps for psychoanalysis (Freud, Jung), humanistic theories (Rogers, Maslow), social-learning theories (Bandura, Mischel), cognitive-phenomenological theories (Kelly, Laing), trait theories (Eysenck, Cattell, the Big Five), and so on. In a broad synthesis drawn selectively from traditional theories and contemporary research trends, McAdams and Pals (2006) recently developed a five-point framework for an integrative science of personality. They view personality as *(1) an individual's unique variation on the general evolutionary design for human nature, expressed as a developing pattern of (2) dispositional traits, (3) characteristic adaptations, and (4) self-defining life narratives, complexly and differentially situated in (5) culture and social context*.

From the standpoint of McAdams and Pals (2006), each human life is an individual variation on a general design whose functional significance makes primary sense in terms of the human environment of evolutionary adaptedness (EEA). Variations on a small set of broad dispositional traits implicated in social life (encompassed in the Big Five trait taxonomy) constitute the most stable and recognizable aspect of

psychological individuality. Beyond dispositional traits, however, human lives vary with respect to a wide range of motivational, social-cognitive, and developmental adaptations, contextualized in time, place, and/or social role. Beyond dispositional traits and characteristic adaptations, human lives vary with respect to the integrative life stories, or personal narratives, that individuals construct to make meaning and identity in the modern world. Culture exerts differential effects on different levels of personality: It exerts modest effects on the phenotypic expression of dispositional traits; it shows a stronger impact on the content and timing of characteristic adaptations; and it reveals its deepest and most profound influence on life stories, essentially providing a menu of themes, images, and plots for the psychosocial construction of narrative identity.

What then is a *moral* personality? Moral considerations appear at all levels in the framework provided by McAdams and Pals (2006). Human beings have evolved to be moral animals, designed to experience strong emotional reactions to and to build cultural systems around issues of fairness, harm, and purity. Human beings have evolved to take special note of those broad variations in behavior that seem to have moral significance. With respect to those broadest categories of psychological variation, each of the Big Five domains for dispositional traits carries some moral meaning. For example, agreeableness (*A*) speaks to caring and altruistic tendencies; mean-spirited, antisocial people (low in *A*) are viewed by others to be bad people. People who are especially low on openness to experience (*O*) may be unable or unwilling to engage in the kind of moral perspective taking that is required to get beyond, say, the conventional level of moral development in Kohlberg's stage model. Even extraversion (*E*, also known as positive affectivity) and neuroticism (*N*, or negative affectivity) bear substantial moral freight.

At the level of characteristic adaptations, people show tremendous variation with respect to moral goals, values, virtues, and beliefs. Of special importance here are morally-flavored developmental adaptations. A good example of a developmental version of characteristic adaptations that carries significant moral meaning is the concept of *generativity*, defined as the adult's concern for or commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations, through parenting, teaching, mentoring, and engaging in a wide variety of life tasks aimed at leaving a positive legacy for the future (Erikson, 1963; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Erikson viewed generativity to be the prime developmental challenge of the middle-adult years. A growing body of research on individual differences in generativity shows that adults who score high on self-report generativity measures show a wide range of "good" and caring behaviors, ranging from constructive and involved parenting to volunteer work in their communities to high levels of religious involvement and civic engagement (McAdams, 2001).

Not only do moral meanings run through the Big Five dispositional traits and through certain characteristic adaptations in personality such as the developmental task of generativity, but morality is also of prime importance in the construction of self-defining life stories – the internalized and evolving narratives of the self that people formulate, and carry around with them, in order to make meaning and finding purpose in life. All life stories speak from a particular moral perspective (MacIntyre, 1981). Furthermore, in any given culture some stories will exhibit greater moral cachet than will others. Summarizing 15 years of research on the life stories of highly generative midlife men and women, McAdams (2006) argues that Americans have traditionally valued life stories of personal *redemption* as the quintessential narratives of virtue and goodness in adult life.

Quantitative and qualitative studies show that American adults who score high on self-report measures of generativity are especially likely to narrate their lives in redemptive terms. Although all life stories are unique, highly generative adults are more likely than their less generative counterparts in American society to construct personal narratives that accentuate the following six themes:

1. *Early blessing*: As a child, the protagonist enjoys an early advantage or favored status compared to others;
2. *Sensitivity to the suffering of others*: As a child, the protagonist takes special note of and is moved by other people's pain and/or social injustices;
3. *Moral steadfastness*: By the time the protagonist has completed adolescence, he or she commits to a clear and deeply valued personal ideology that does *not* change in substantial ways in the chapters to follow;
4. *Redemption sequences*: As the plot unfolds, the protagonist experiences many setbacks and endures suffering, but good outcomes and interpretations typically result; negative events are redeemed by positive outcomes or by lessons learned, insights gained, potentials realized, and so on;
5. *Conflict between power and love*: The protagonist wants to feel strong and free but also longs for connection with others, which results in some frustration in the story;
6. *Prosocial goals for the future*: The protagonist looks to the future with hope and with the expectation that his or her products and projects will continue to grow and develop into the next generation.

Taken together, these six themes comprise what McAdams (2006) names *the redemptive self*. In contemporary American society, the redemptive self is a particular kind of life story, or narrative identity, that supports a caring and productive life in midlife. It is a narrative framework that many Americans use to make sense of and evaluate "a good life." Cultural sources for the redemptive self can be traced back to the stories of atonement in 17th-century Puritan autobiographies, stories of upward social mobility and the American Dream first developed by Benjamin Franklin in the 18th century (and the Horatio Alger stories of the 19th), stories of liberation and emancipation as most powerfully narrated by escaped 19th-century African-American slaves, and the 20th-century narratives of recovery and self-actualization that come to us from American self-help psychology, 12-step programs, motivational gurus, Hollywood movies, and a thousand other sources. Redemptive life stories help to sustain generativity by reminding the bearer of the story that he or she is one of the blessed, chosen people, whose manifest destiny is to make the world a better place – the gifted protagonist in an unredeemed and dangerous world, who will overcome adversity and leave a positive legacy of the self for future generations. Highly generative American adults need a story like this one, for generativity itself is hard and often thankless work. Therefore, they implicitly shape their self-conceptions to fit the redemptive self. The story becomes part of their personality, independent of though related in complex ways to their dispositional traits and characteristic adaptations.

For many Americans, the redemptive self spells out the script of a life story that is both inspiring and good. The story motivates, sustains, and provides meaning for American moral projects, both at the individual level and for organizations, groups, and

society as a whole. At the same time, variations on this kind of life story can be read as tales of arrogance, self-righteousness, and naivete. For all its strengths and moral power, therefore, the redemptive self may also have a dark side. But this should not be surprising, or even distressing, for no story is perfect for all time and in all places. Every life story, like every life, finds its ultimate meanings and justifications in the culture within which it is made, shaped, and lived. In a similar sense, moral personalities are themselves cultural products, pertaining to the particular constellation of dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and life narratives into which a given society or collective invests value, worth, and ultimate significance.

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