

**Moral Personality: We Know What's (Im)Moral, but
What's (not) Personality?**

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Précis of talk to be delivered at
Notre Dame Symposium on Personality and Moral Character
October 13, 2006

When discussing the moral domain, we commonly know what we mean by the word “moral.” Both the professional and the layperson recognize the domain we call moral and differentiate it from others (e.g., circumstances involving personal preferences or social norms). When contemplating moral dilemmas, people commonly agree on which options are morally correct – which options one calls “moral” – even when they cannot articulate the principles underlying their correctness. Although there sometimes is ambiguity (it may difficult to demarcate the moral domain formally; some moral dilemmas are ambiguous), there nonetheless exists innumerable cases in which the referent for the word “moral” is clear.

Such is not the case for the word “personality.” Allport famously devoted an entire chapter of his 1937 text solely to definitions of the term. Personality psychology’s most sustained line of discourse – the person/situation debate triggered primarily by Mischel’s 1968 critique – seemed, to many, to rest on the question of whether there actually existed any referent for the word; in other words, people questioned whether “personality exists.” More than most fields, personality psychology has struggled to figure out what it is talking about.

A necessary step for a conference on moral personality, then, is to determine what we are

talking about when using the word personality. An initial point in this talk will be that the term personality has acquired two qualitatively different meanings in the contemporary scientific literature; ambiguity persists even when the word is used in the seemingly well-specified phrase “personality structure.” When studying personality, adopting personality constructs, and positing a personality structure, some investigators are referring to inter-individual differences in the population. For example, statistical factors that summarize inter-individual, between-person variations in the population at large (e.g., the “Big Five” factors) commonly are called “the structure of personality.” Other investigators, when positing personality constructs, are referring to intra-individual mental systems; a model of personality structure, in this second view, is a model of within-person, intra-psychic organization and content. In an effort to disambiguate discourse, the present speaker has introduced the term “personality architecture” to refer to this latter usage; a model of personality architecture, then, is a conceptual model of the overall design and operating characteristics of intra-individual cognitive and affective systems.

Because the study of moral psychology requires an understanding of intra-psychic processes of moral reasoning, the remainder of the talk will focus on questions of intra-individual personality structures and dynamics, or personality architecture.

If personality refers to intra-individual cognitive and affective systems, the next question that arises is “what is *not* personality?” The intra-individual definition of personality threatens to convert “personality psychology” to “psychology” as a whole. The threat is repelled by

recognizing that there exists a set of phenomena that are uniquely defining of inquiry in personality psychology; they include phenomena of personality coherence, continuity, and uniqueness, as will be discussed briefly. The personality psychologist, then, seeks theoretical models of personality architecture that might yield explanations of these phenomena.

The talk will outline three classes of options one has in crafting such a theoretical model. One might posit 1) a small number of basic drives or motives (a strategy pioneered by Freud), 2) a large number of evolved, domain-specific problem-solving devices (the strategy of evolutionary psychology), or 3) a system, or “network,” of cognitive and affective processes whose content, and perhaps whose patterns of functioning, are socioculturally acquired (an approach pioneered in the mid-20th century by the personality theorist George Kelly).

This third strategy is executed in contemporary social-cognitive theories of personality, advanced in the past last third of the 20th century most prominently by Bandura and by Mischel. The talk will outline guiding principles of the social-cognitive perspective. It then will present a theoretical model of the author’s that is designed to capitalize on and advance beyond prior work in the social-cognitive tradition. This model, a Knowledge-and-Appraisal Personality Architecture (KAPA), includes formal principles for distinguishing among cognitive and affective systems of personality – that is, principles for delineating a system of personality variables. Two principles are key: 1) a distinction, introduced originally by Richard Lazarus, between enduring knowledge structures and dynamics appraisal processes, and 2) a cross-cutting conceptual distinction that draws partly on work in philosophy of mind by Searle, and that yields

a differentiation among a) beliefs (about the world and oneself), b) goals and intention (that are not currently realized or made “true,” but may be realized in the future), and c) standards of evaluation (which are subjective and technically not “true/false,” and that may fail to correspond with one’s personal goals for action).

The KAPA model also includes principles of personality assessment that facilitate an understanding of social-cognitive knowledge structures and appraisal processes that distinguish individuals from one another. In the KAPA approach, personality assessment is contextualized; one seeks to identify the potentially idiosyncratic contexts in which social-cognitive systems come into play in processes of meaning construction and self-regulation.

The talk will review how the KAPA model resolves traditional issues in personality psychology including:

1) The Conceptual Status of Dispositional Constructs

– Dispositions are seen to have descriptive, not explanatory, status. Investigators may construct alternative dispositional summaries – global dispositional tendencies, contextualized *if...then...* profiles, etc. – no one of which has privileged theoretical status. Since the investigator’s constructs for assessment inevitably will map only imperfectly onto the qualities of the individual being assessed, a premium is placed on assessment techniques that are idiographically tailored.

2) Cross-Situational Coherence and Consistency in Personality

– Enduring knowledge structures may contribute to substantial cross-situational

consistency in personality functioning. However, there is no reason to presume that cross-situational coherence, at the intra-individual level, will correspond to the structure of inter-individual constructs; the individual's pattern of personality consistency, in other words, may violate the structure of traditional personality trait categories. This implies that, historically (and ironically), traditional trait-based analyses may have been underestimated cross-situational coherence in personality functioning. Research using the KAPA model and its personality assessment strategies to identify patterns of cross-situational consistency in appraisal will be presented.

3) Bridging: From Cognition to Action

– The KAPA model creates a bridge from cognition to action by recognizing that “cognition” is not a unity. Dynamic appraisal processes – surely an aspect of cognition – have long been studied in literatures on emotion, stress, and coping as proximal determinants of experience and action. Principles of social cognition that link enduring knowledge structures to these dynamic appraisal processes thus inherently provide a conceptual link from stable cognitive elements to patterns to emotion and experience that, themselves, may be variable across context.

The talk will conclude by commenting on questions in moral psychology that are, and are not, well addressed by a social-cognitive personality architecture such as the KAPA model.

Relevant Publications by the Speaker

*Notre Dame Symposium on Personality and Moral Character, October 12-14, 2006
Hosted by the Center for Ethical Education*

- Caprara, G. V., & Cervone, D. (2000). *Personality: Determinants, dynamics, and potentials*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cervone, D. (2004). The architecture of personality. *Psychological Review*, 111, 183-204.
- Cervone, D. (2005). Personality architecture: Within-person structures and processes. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 56, 423-452.
- Cervone, D., Shadel, W. G., & Jencius, S. (2001). Social-cognitive theory of personality assessment. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5, 33-51.
- Cervone, D., & Mischel, W. (Eds.) (2002). *Advances in personality science*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Cervone, D., & Shoda, Y. (Eds.) (1999). *The coherence of personality: Social-cognitive bases of consistency, variability, and organization*. New York: Guilford Press.