

Updating Moral Development Theory Early Conscience

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One of the great strengths of contemporary work in moral development is its life-span orientation and the long legacy of theory and research on which contemporary scholars can draw. Moreover, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in the development of moral character and moral personality that derives, in part, from a realization of how the growth of moral awareness is tied to the development of self, identity, and personality. This work, to which speakers at this symposium have been made seminal contributions, has important applications to the field of moral education and to formal and informal efforts to strengthen the development of virtuous character.

Today I hope to draw our attention to another cutting-edge advance in thinking about moral development and moral personality, and that is a reconsideration of the foundations for moral character established in early childhood. Although developmental theory often emphasizes formative influences in early childhood, the early years do not fare well in traditional moral development theory. Whether viewed from the perspective of Piaget's or Kohlberg's theories of moral reasoning, or from the standpoint of early psychoanalytic or learning theorists, the nature of morality in early childhood is distinctly different from the more humanistic, reasoned moral orientation of later childhood. Each of these traditional approaches portrays young children as externalized in their moral orientation, motivated to comply either through anxiety over the loss of parental love or to obtain the rewards of cooperation and escape the pain of punishment. For this reason, Kohlberg characterized young children as premoral, and followed Piaget in arguing that this derived from the young child's egocentrism and thus being governed by self-interested rather than other-oriented motives. The terms that these scholars used to characterize early childhood morality – "preconventional" for Kohlberg, and "heteronomous" for Piaget – each underscore the preschooler's authoritarian approach and that morality is primarily in the interest of achieving instrumental ends. Psychoanalytic, learning, and cognitive-developmental theory were each in uncommon agreement about these attributes of early childhood moral development, which contributed to moving the focus of research on moral growth to later childhood and adolescence, when much more interesting developmental changes were believed to be occurring.

This portrayal of early childhood morality encompasses much that is true of young children, particularly their reliance on close relationships with parents and their

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sensitivity to the incentives and sanctions of others. But like so much else in this post-Piagetian world, it is a view that is fundamentally out of date with much that is now known about early psychological development and moral growth. Hardly any serious student of young children talks about their being egocentric, for example, because of the remarkable evidence that infants and toddlers are not only aware of differences in how people think and feel but are deeply interested in learning about others' mental states from before the first birthday. In this presentation, therefore, my goal is to outline this new understanding of development of moral character in early childhood and its implications for how we might update moral development theory.

Much of the relevant research is under a different conceptual rubric: namely, early conscience development. What is "conscience"? Conscience may be defined as the cognitive, affective, relational, and other processes that influence how young children construct and act consistently with generalizable, internal standards of conduct. As a result, the study of conscience development is a broader endeavor than the study of moral judgment or moral compliance in the early years. Consistent with the integrated developmental influences shaping early moral development, students of conscience have studied in young children the growth of many attributes, including (a) cooperation with a caregiver (such as in a clean-up task), (b) unsupervised compliance with a standard (often called behavioral internalization), (c) moral affect (especially in behavioral studies of guilt or shame), (d) moral reasoning (usually involving simplified semiprojective moral dilemmas), (e) prosocial affect (such as empathy), (f) prosocial behavior (such as helping a baby in distress), and (g) the early-emerging "moral self" by which young children perceive themselves in ways relevant to moral compliance. Each of these dimensions of early conscience development has been studied in young children below the age of 6, with the research literature indicating that there are important developmental changes in these dimensions of morality during the early years, and that the emergence of individual differences in behavior that are associated with relational influences and factors internal to the child.

If traditional representations of early childhood morality underestimate the scope and sophistication of young children's moral behavior, what reasons do we have for thinking that the preschool years are particularly important for moral development in the years to come? One reason is research evidence that young children are already establishing the conceptual foundations for moral reasoning on which they will draw in the years that follow. Another reason is research indicating that relational influences are also formative for establishing young children on pathways of moral character that will continue into middle childhood and adolescence. Taken together, these studies suggest that moral character in childhood is founded on the kind of human connections that young children have forged with people who matter to them, through which they understand and care about the associations between their actions and the feelings of others.

There are several conceptual foundations to early conscience development that provide a basis for moral growth and which will continue to guide children in the years to come. These include:

- *Social referencing* by which infants, before their first birthday, look to the faces of adults for emotional cues to guide their responses to uncertain circumstances. Social referencing reflects a young child's nonegocentric awareness that the adult may have an emotional response to a situation that can provide information concerning its threat or danger, and experimental studies have shown that infants and toddlers respond appropriately to an adult's expressions of reassurance or fear, just as we all read and respond to the emotions of others around us. Social referencing is also an avenue for conscience development as caregivers use their emotional cues deliberately to signal caution or a warning when toddlers are about to venture into dangerous or forbidden activity, thus imbuing certain acts with affective significance for the child. Caregivers also use their emotional cues to induce sympathy for someone who has been harmed by the child's actions. In so doing, social referencing helps to connect behavioral standards with the feelings of people who matter. Moreover, social referencing is also enlisted by caregivers to convey evaluations of the young child, especially when the child is engaged in desirable or disapproved conduct, and thus help to induce the relevant self-referential emotional response to good behavior or misbehavior.
- *Comprehending obligatory and voluntary activity* develops within young children's broader understanding of how mental and emotional states guide behavior, which has been studied under the conceptual rubric "theory of mind." In recent studies, researchers have found that 3-year-olds are exquisitely sensitive to violations of permission rules, readily identifying examples of compliance and noncompliance in hypothetical stories. However, recent research by my colleague Kristin Lagattuta shows that it is not until later that they comprehend the emotional dimensions of compliance – the value of taking pleasure in doing the right thing even though it means denying one's present desire is difficult for preschoolers to comprehend. This developing literature suggests that young children are constructing an understanding of the distinctions between what one *wants* to do, what one *must* do, and what one *does in compliance* with another – which is an important foundation to morality.
- *Social domain comprehension* describes young children's understanding of different kinds of behavioral rules and the reasons for them. Research by Smetana and her colleagues has shown that by the ages of 3 and 4, preschoolers distinguish between moral and social-conventional violations as adults do, judging moral violations as more serious and less revocable, in part because of their human consequences. This is a conceptual distinction that they will use throughout life.
- Late in the preschool years, young children also exhibit *fairness consideration* in their evaluations of social behavior. Research by Melanie Killen and her colleagues has shown, for example, that older preschoolers reject gender exclusion in ingroup-outgroup distinctions even though they recognize the

application of common gender-based stereotypes in group play (e.g., girls excluding boys in doll play). An early sense of fairness reflects the early emergence of distributive justice principles that will flourish with older children's comprehension of the different alternative bases of fairness considerations.

- Throughout the preschool years, *empathy* remains an important resource for developing conscience and moral character, owing to young children's emotional sensitivity to the feelings of other and their strong efforts to understand those feelings.
- Early childhood also witnesses the *emergence of self-understanding* which incorporates a developing moral self. One of the discoveries of recent years is that preschoolers perceive themselves in terms of their psychological characteristics as well as their behavioral and physical characteristics, and research by Grazyna Kochanska has shown that included in this early developing psychological self-awareness is the perception of oneself as a person who feels badly about doing the wrong thing, apologizes for wrongdoing, is concerned with maintaining good relationships with parents, and related behavior. A "moral self" emerging in early childhood is clearly related to the development of moral character.
- Finally, early childhood also witnesses the emergence of young children's *sensitivity to standards violations*. As described by Kagan, beginning at 19 months toddlers will respond to toys or other objects that are obviously broken or damaged with obvious concern, such as showing negative affect, touching the flaw, and exhibiting a preference for unbroken objects. Kagan interprets this as reflecting an early emergent moral sense. My student Meredith McGinley and I have explored this further because we were interested in whether toddlers of this age responded uniquely to broken or damaged objects, or whether they respond more generally with interest to any object that is atypical from the norm. We asked this question because toddlerhood is a period when young children become very interested in normative expectations for many aspects of their life experience: they are concerned about the normative references for words in early language development, they become embarrassed when their typical appearance is altered by a spot of rouge on the nose, they can become rigid in their insistence that daily routines occur in a predictable manner, and in other ways they seem to be conceptually oriented toward distinguishing what is typical and normative from what is atypical. In our study, therefore, we examined toddlers' affective and behavioral responses to toys or objects that differed from the norm in several different ways: some were obviously broken (what we called "morally violated"), but others were simply rendered functionally impaired without being broken (such as a teddy bear without stuffing, or a cup with a finished hole on the side), and others were functional but just looked atypically (such as a teddy bear with wings and a crown). In a nutshell, we found that on all of our measures, toddlers responded comparably to all instances atypicality: whether the object was flawed or just abnormal, toddlers did not distinguish morally

violated objects from others that were atypical. This suggests to us that one of the conceptual resources for early conscience development is an early emerging sensitivity to nonnormativeness which becomes enlisted into morality as certain behaviors are identified as being nonnormative and disapproved.

Taken together, recent research with preschoolers suggests that many of the conceptual foundations of moral reasoning are well-established in early childhood, and that young children begin to reason about behavioral violations, feelings, and themselves as moral actors in ways that are consistent with the more sophisticated forms of moral reasoning and moral character that will emerge in the years to come.

In addition to these conceptual foundations, research on conscience development has also shown that relational influences are central to the early development of moral character. These relational influences are far more diverse than considerations over the consistency or harshness of parental discipline or the child's anxiety over the parent's continued love. Instead, the concepts used by contemporary researchers focus on the incentives afforded by a warm, supportive parent-child relationship, and focus on broad dimensions of relational quality (such as the positive affect shared by mother and child, the extent to which they enjoy a mutually responsive orientation toward each other, or the security of their attachment relationship), and narrower relational processes (such as the content and quality of parent-child conversational discourse about good behavior and misbehavior, and the nature of the parent's proactive and reactive disciplinary practices). Taken together, this research shows that one of the most important early foundations of conscience is the manner in which the parent-child relationship enlists the child into a relational system of positive reciprocity that motivates the child's cooperation and compliance.

Research I have conducted with Deborah Laible illustrates these relational influences. In two studies to be described in my presentation, we have examined the influence of the general quality of the parent-child relationship and how they converse about compliance and misbehavior on early conscience development. We have focused on the content and quality of conversations between parents and children because, consistent with traditional moral development theory, we believe these provide young children with the conceptual foundations for reasoning about moral problems for themselves, especially when the conversation focuses on the child's misbehavior or good conduct. However, in our research we have prompted mothers and their preschool offspring to talk not only during conflict itself, but also afterwards, when passions have cooled, and both mothers and their children can discuss past misbehavior (and good behavior) in a more reasoned manner and in which young children might be more capable of processing the parent's moral message. In these contexts, we were especially interested in the themes in parental speech that would be especially influential. For example, would the frequency with which mothers talked about rules and the consequences of breaking them be particularly predictive of early conscience, consistent with the traditional emphasis on the young child's punishment-and-obedience orientation?

To summarize our findings:

- *How* mothers talk about compliance and misbehavior with their young offspring is important to the development of conscience. Consistent with what we know about the importance of parent-child communication during the discipline encounter with older children (but inconsistent with traditional views of the young child's concern with rules and punishment), it is not the frequency with which mothers talk about rules and the consequences of breaking them that is important, but rather maternal references to feelings. Talking about the feelings of the child, of other people, even of the mother herself helps to situate issues of compliance and misbehavior in a humanistic context in which consideration of how people feel is important. And especially when maternal talk about feelings occurs in the context of richly elaborated discourse – in which mothers are providing detailed background information about the causes and consequences of people's behavior – and of her reasoned justifications for what she asks of the child, mothers' feeling-oriented conversational discourse contributes importantly to early conscience. In a sense, these forms of mother-child conversation help young children to establish a human connection between their own actions and the needs and welfare of others.
- A warm, secure parent-child relationship is also important to early conscience development. Virtually every kind of measure of positive parent-child comity, whether in terms of their shared positive affect, the extent to which they are mutually responsive, or a secure attachment, has been found in our research and Kochanska's to be important to early conscience. Although much more remains to be learned about why parental warmth, security, and support are important, such relational quality may help to consolidate the child's human connection to others who matter, to make others' feelings important influences on the child's behavior, and to socialize moral conduct and moral character in this manner.
- Finally, it is clear that early conscience is multifaceted. Different features of conscience have different – although related – predictors in the parent-child relationship.

If this portrayal of the conceptual and relational foundations of early conscience development is accurate, what are its implications for moral development theory and the development of moral character? There are several possible implications. First, early conscience development arises in multifaceted contexts, not only those associated with the discipline encounter. In the development of the parent-child relationship, in how young children construct expectancies for what is normative in their life experience, in their developing psychological understanding, and in their emergent psychological self-awareness which includes a developing moral self, moral character emerges and conscience develops. This suggests that moral character has early origins in diverse developmental processes. Second, the processes influencing conscience development are remarkably similar to those influencing moral development in later years. Young

children, like older children, benefit from warm parental support, reasoned discourse about compliance and misbehavior, good moral exemplars (particularly in the family), and respect for themselves and their feelings. There is thus considerably greater continuity between the developmental influences on moral development in the preschool years and those at later ages than traditional moral development theories have alleged. Third, and finally, there is now value in considering how early childhood provides the basis for the morality of later years. Young children are developing moral orientations that are simpler, but fundamentally similar, to those of older children and adolescents, and understanding how forms of moral judgment, affect, and behavior that are observed at older ages are rooted in the experiences of early childhood constitutes an important research