Moral Personality Exemplified

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Contemporary explanations of moral functioning have emerged within the context of the influence of The Enlightenment, a movement which promulgated an unremittingly dualistic view of human nature—reason versus passion. In this view, rationality formed the core of moral functioning, whereas personality was regarded with unequivocal mistrust, as a subverting bias that had to be suppressed. As a consequence of the ubiquitous adoption of that view, moral psychology is now rich in its understandings of the cognitive aspects of moral functioning but relatively ignorant of personological ones. And, although moral cognition is undisputedly an essential aspect of the moral domain, it has been found to be only weakly predictive of moral action (the so-called "judgment–action gap"). To illustrate, history abounds with a striking disparity: rationally advanced individuals have been responsible for some of the greatest humanitarian acts (e.g., Gandhi's advocacy for treating all humanity with dignity in non-violent resistance) but also for some of the worst atrocities (e.g., Eichmann's claim of taking Kant's categorical imperative as the guiding norm for his life). I contend that, in order to provide a more coherent and comprehensive account of moral functioning, the field must move beyond single-variable theories and, instead, encompass more of the breadth and complexity of the domain. One way to accomplish this goal is to accord greater conceptual and empirical attention to aspects of the moral personality that have long been eschewed.

I have pursued two lines of mutually informative research relevant to this enterprise: One has examined naturalistic conceptions of moral functioning; the other has examined the personality characteristics of moral exemplars. The study of naturalistic conceptions of moral

functioning aims to identify the personality traits that people believe characterize moral

excellence and, as such, taps their implicit personality theory regarding morality. The rationale

for this approach is twofold. First, such ordinary conceptions do play a causal role in people's

moral judgments, emotions, and behaviors; and thus are important to understand if we are to

explain their moral functioning (a claim which holds regardless whether such conceptions are

veridical or misguided). Second, a broad survey of ordinary conceptions may reveal aspects of

moral functioning that have been inadequately represented in philosophically constrained models

of moral psychology. In other words, explicit theories of moral functioning should account for

the implicit theories of ordinary people. While the findings of these studies (Walker & Hennig,

2004; Walker & Pitts, 1998) have been informative in many regards, this approach is not without

its drawbacks. One limitation concerns the restricted explanatory power of the natural language

paradigm with its reliance on trait-term descriptions of personality; but the major limitation is

that it is merely descriptive of people's conceptions and does not reveal the actual psychological

functioning of moral exemplars. Philosophers (Flanagan, 1991; Johnson, 1996) have similarly

come to the realization that, in defining moral ideals, ethical theories must be constrained by an

empirically informed account of the actual psychological processes in moral functioning. It is

that line of research which is my present focus.

Only a handful of studies have examined the psychological functioning of moral

exemplars and, among these, case-study analyses are the norm (not surprisingly given the

relative dearth of moral exemplars). In one of the landmark studies of moral exemplarity, Colby

and Damon (1992) interviewed a small sample of social activists who had been identified for

their extraordinary moral commitment and, through qualitative analyses, identified several

developmental processes relevant to moral action. Although their research yielded valuable

insights, the lack of both a comparison group and objective methodology leaves numerous

questions unanswered. There is some research that meets these criteria, notably the studies of

Hart and Fegley (1995), Matsuba and Walker (2004, 2005), and Reimer and Wade-Stein (2004);

interestingly all conducted with samples of adolescents and young adults and all focused on the

same singular type of moral exemplarity (caring volunteers).

The present research attempts to extend the findings of these previous studies by drawing

participants from across the adult life-span, by comparing two quite distinct types of moral

exemplarity (brave vs. caring), and by using a broad-band assessment of personality functioning.

The study was framed by three primary questions:

1. Are personality variables merely redundant to moral reasoning in accounting for moral action

    or do they actually add to the explanatory equation?

2. Do brave and caring moral exemplars evidence somewhat unique personality profiles,

    suggestive of multiple ideals of moral maturity?

3. Are there shared aspects of the personality of these contrasting types of moral exemplars

    which differentiate them from ordinary individuals, suggestive of the psychological core of

    morality?

Participants identified for this study as moral exemplars were recipients of a national

award for their moral action. In the Canadian honors system, comparable awards are given to

people who have risked their life to save another (*Medal of Bravery*) and to those who have

displayed exceptional care (*Caring Canadian Award*). Participants were 50 recent awardees (25

brave and 25 caring adults), as well as a demographically-matched comparison group of 50

people. They completed a set of personality inventories (*Revised Interpersonal Adjective

Scales–Big Five*, Wiggins, 1995; *Personal Strivings List*, Emmons, 1999) and participated in a

life-review interview (McAdams, 1995) which prompted them to discuss the main chapters of

their life story, a series of eight critical life events (e.g., high-point, earliest memory), and a

difficult moral conflict.

My intent in this study was to provide a comprehensive assessment of the range of personality functioning. McAdams' (1995) typology of personality description provides a useful template. He proposed that individual differences in personality can be described on three broad levels, which together yield a comprehensive and coherent profile. Thus, the following personality variables were tapped by these measures:

level of analysis	domain	variable
dispositional traits – broad, decontextualized, stable, relatively noncontingent, and implicitly comparative dimensions	interpersonal circumplex	dominance
		nurturance
characteristic adaptations – motivational, developmental, and strategic aspects of personality, as evidenced in particular temporal, situational, and role contexts	goal motivation	power
		affiliation/intimacy
		generativity
		spiritual self-transcendence
		identity/personal growth
integrative narratives of the self – the psychosocial construction of a framework for personal identity and for deriving unity, purpose, and meaning in life	motivational themes	agency
		communion
	transformative life experiences	affective tone
		redemption
	early advantage	sensitization to the needs of others
		helpers and enemies
		quality of attachments

This study was premised on the notion that moral cognition fails to adequately explain moral action and that personological factors may help to bridge that gap. This premise was

examined via logistic regression, with the dependent variable being moral action (exemplar- vs. comparison-group status). Stage of moral judgment was entered first as a control variable and then personality variables were allowed to enter the equation. These personality variables dramatically improved predictability. Thus, personality factors are not collinear with moral reasoning; indeed, they account for a sizeable and unique portion of the variance in moral action.

The second issue concerned contrasting depictions of moral maturity. The personality of caring exemplars was somewhat more transparent than that of brave ones. This is not surprising given that caring exemplars were identified for long-term service which probably reflects deeply ingrained aspects of character and motivation, whereas brave exemplars were identified for single acts of heroism to which powerful situational factors undoubtedly contributed. It was found that brave and caring exemplars embodied somewhat different personality profiles, each with its own particular strengths and weaknesses. Caring exemplars were more nurturant and relational than were brave exemplars, they expressed more generative and power strivings, their life stories were more optimistic and positive, and they had a stronger sensitization to the needs of others in early life.

The final issue pertained to the foundational core of the moral domain. Some aspects of personality were shared by both types of exemplars but distinguished them from the comparison groups. Interestingly, the aspects of personality that best distinguished moral exemplars reflected the level of personality analysis that examines integrative narratives of the self. Moral exemplars, for example, evidenced stronger themes of both agency and communion than did ordinary individuals. They were more likely to construe critical life events redemptively and the affective tone of their life stories was more optimistic. Finally, they recalled a range of advantages in their early life experiences. These aspects are indicative of the psychological foundation of the moral personality and, as such, help to provide a more full-bodied account of

processes in moral functioning.