

What do we evaluate when we evaluate moral character?

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Abstract: Despite growing interest in the topic of *moral character*, there is very little precision and a lack of agreement among researchers as to what is evaluated when people evaluate character. In this chapter we define moral character in novel social cognitive terms and offer empirical support for the idea that the central qualities of moral character are those deemed essential for social relationships.

What do we evaluate when we evaluate moral character?

The notion of moral character is central to the way that people think about and evaluate one another (Landy & Uhlman, this volume; Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011). People prioritize moral character traits when judging the overall favorability of a person (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014), and define personal identity largely in terms of moral characteristics (Strohinger & Nichols, 2014). Moreover, assessments of moral character seem to be rooted in a shared social reality: People's self-rated standing on a variety of moral character traits tends to be associated with the way that others view them (Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2013), and different observers tend to agree with one another about a target's character (Helzer, Furr, Hawkins, Barranti, Blackie & Fleeson, 2014).

We approach this chapter from the theoretical standpoint that the centrality of character evaluation is due to its function in social life. Evaluation of character is, we think, inherently a judgment about a person's qualifications for being a solid long-term social investment. That is, people attempt to suss out moral character because they want to know whether a particular agent is the type of person who likely possesses the necessary (even if not sufficient) qualities they expect in a social relationship. In developing these ideas theoretically and empirically, we consider what form moral character takes, discuss what this proposal suggests about how people may and do assess others' moral character, and identify an assortment of qualities that our perspective predicts will be central to moral character.

In Part 1, we put forward a new idea of what we think moral character means, rooted in a social-cognitive view of the person as a moral being. We introduce the idea that a person's moral character takes the form of moral cognitive machinery—essentially a processor that accepts inputs that, if the processor functions well, should output morally-relevant judgments and

behavior. Because our perspective suggests that moral judgment is ultimately an exercise in evaluating character, we argue that many inputs that are assumed to change people’s moral thinking—even inputs that are not themselves moral in nature—should change how people are judged for what morally-relevant actions they take. We illustrate these implications by drawing on our own recent empirical work that has investigated how people engage in moral character evaluation—what we see as an exercise in identifying whether a person possesses the “right” kind of moral-cognitive machinery to produce sound moral decisions.

In Part 2, we take on the question of content: What are the more specific characteristics of a person with good moral character? That is, instead of considering the abstract form that moral character may take, we ask what qualities define moral character. In this section, we present several forms of preliminary evidence suggesting that moral qualities are those that describe necessary conditions of social investment. In so doing, we engage with two questions. We consider how our perspective is compatible with both moral pluralism and moral universalism—how moral codes may show variety and consistency across cultural contexts. Also, we consider in what circumstances people should be more or less likely to assume that others’ character is more or less upstanding.

A Social-Cognition Conception of Moral Character

In determining whether someone has good moral character, the most intuitive place to start might be their outward behavior. Certain actions (e.g., kicking puppies, donating an organ), in and of themselves, would seem to offer a diagnostic view of the agent’s character. However, in most cases, outward behavior alone is insufficient for character evaluation because such information fails to fully characterize what an actor has done. Is John a bad guy if he does not

tell the truth to his boss? Possibly, but to know for sure, most perceivers would want to know *why* John lied. Even kicking a puppy or donating an organ may be, with reflection, more properly characterized as saving a life or abusing a loved one, respectively, when one learns that the dog was being moved out of oncoming traffic and the donor refused to honor the wishes of a suffering, terminally-ill family member. Stated differently, if one does not know why someone behaved as she did, then in most circumstances one cannot properly characterize their action. Indeed, a plethora of research on the use of intentions, motives, desires, meta-desires, beliefs, and other mental states in moral evaluation (Critcher, Inbar, & Pizarro, 2013; Fedotova, Fincher, Goodwin, & Rozin, 2011; Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012; Monroe & Reeder, 2011; Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Salovey, 2003; Reeder, 2009) collectively highlights that an agent's inferred or stated mental contents provide the proper context in which to evaluate the deeper meaning, and thus, moral significance of his actions.

If outwardly-observed behavior alone is insufficient for classifying most moral behaviors, it is all the more insufficient for evaluating character. Moral character resides not in behaviors themselves, but in the person and his or her cross-temporal, cross-situational proclivity to make morally-relevant decisions in upstanding or disreputable ways. We propose that a good moral character can be thought of as a well-functioning moral-cognitive processor, one that translates relevant inputs (e.g., situational cues, emotional impulses) into morally-appropriate outputs (judgment and behavior). And by *relevant*, we do not mean cues that normatively *should* influence one's judgment and behavior. Instead, we identify cues as relevant if they are seen as likely to influence one's moral thinking, and thus provide information about the soundness of the agent's processor. For example, if a woman donates to a cleft lip charity after seeing emotionally-evocative pictures of those with this birth defect, we gain reassuring information

that she responds in such uncomfortable situations with empathy and compassion instead of by putting on her blinders, and this tells us something favorable about her character. That said, the worthiness of donating to the charity certainly does not depend on whether a donor has seen such pictures.

By analogy, consider what it means for a car to function properly. On the one hand, one could merely assess its “behavior”: Does the car do the things that a “good” car does, namely, travel from its origin to its intended destination? But note that even a broken-down jalopy may pass this test. The driver might want to get the car from the top of a mountain to a valley below. If this were accomplished only by pushing the car over a ledge, we would hardly say this car was in good working order (and most likely would not be anytime soon). If the car’s outward “behavior” is insufficient, what might we use to determine whether the car is a good, safe investment? We know a car functions well when it responds appropriately to input from the driver: a turn of the key, of the wheel, or of the radio volume knob should have predictable consequences for the engine, the car’s trajectory, and the stereo. If those inputs do not prompt the relevant outputs, we say the car is broken. We would be reluctant to ride in such a car, let alone purchase it, and we would likely keep our loved ones away, as well.

We argue that assessments of moral character—the *moral-cognitive machinery* inside a person that responds to influencing inputs with potentially-appropriate outputs—operate similarly. Thus in judging others’ character, people want to know whether the agent attends to relevant cues, processes those cues appropriately, and arrives at his or her moral decisions in light of those cues in the way that a good moral decision-maker – i.e., one who has good moral-cognitive machinery—would do. If moral judgment is indeed in the service of determining who is a good candidate for social investment, it makes sense that perceivers are concerned not

merely with an agent's specific actions or motives, but in whether the agent can be trusted to make sound moral decisions in light of the many inputs and contexts that he or she may face.

It follows, then, that moral judgments (serving as a read-off of perceived moral character) should be sensitive to the demonstrated link between inputs and outputs. Consider the following scenario: A military commander must decide whether to order an airstrike against an al-Qaeda terrorist cell, which would kill several top al-Qaeda leaders and thwart an imminent 9/11-style attack, but would also sacrifice one innocent person. In recent research, we (Critcher, Helzer, Tannenbaum, & Pizarro, 2015) asked people to assess the moral character of a commander who orders this strike or chooses not to under one of two conditions. In one condition, the commander can see a terrorist leader through the window of the building as he decides whether to strike. In the other condition, the commander can see the innocent person. On a strict act-based account of moral judgment, and according to several normative ethical theories (including both deontology and utilitarianism), the commander's vantage point should be irrelevant to the evaluation of the commander's actions or character. That is, his vantage point does not change his actions' consonance with these ethical theories' prescriptions. However, we found that the commander's point of view *did* matter: on average, people saw him as having less praiseworthy character if he ordered the strike with the innocent person, rather than the terrorist, in view.

The reason this seemingly-irrelevant variation in context mattered to people's judgments is because it revealed something about the goodness of the agent's moral-cognitive machinery, its response to triggering inputs with appropriate (or inappropriate) outputs. When the terrorist was in view, participants assumed that utilitarian concerns about preventing future large-scale destruction would loom large in the commander's mind. But when the innocent translator loomed large in the commander's visual field, it was assumed that deontological prohibitions

against taking life would weigh heavily on his conscience. The commander was seen as possessing more praiseworthy character if he then acted on the thoughts that were believed to be prompted by his context. The contextual dependency we observed in this and other studies suggests that people were looking for evidence of a well-functioning moral-cognitive machinery—one that responds to environmental inputs that are assumed to inspire morally-relevant cognitions with the matching behavioral outputs. In so doing, perceivers are observing moral character that accelerates when the pedal is depressed, and that stops short when the break is slammed.

From General to Specific: What Defines Moral Character?

To say that an agent has good moral character is to say that her moral-cognitive machinery works soundly; it predictably translates inputs into morally-appropriate outputs. But what qualities are people looking for when they are assessing another's moral character? In moral psychologists' quest to understand what differentiates *actions* that people deem morally acceptable vs. unacceptable, they have spent most of their efforts examining people's reactions to moral dilemmas. Such dilemmas afford the opportunity to isolate various features of actions and examine their effects on resulting moral judgments, providing a crisp picture of the features of action to which moral judgments are responsive.

In this effort to locate the fine line between right and wrong, however, moral psychologists have not paid as much attention to more prototypical, everyday examples of morality and immorality (cf. Hofmann, Wisneski, Brandt, & Skitka, 2014). This neglect poses a problem for applying our character-based perspective. Without more clearly understanding the domains that are more or less typical of lay conceptions of morality, we do not know precisely what it is that people are trying to assess or comment on when they consider others' moral

character. To return to the car example, one might be comfortable investing long-term in a car even if it needs a new sound system because sound systems are inessential features (for most of us), and are thus only somewhat relevant to the car's overall value. Most would say a car still works even when the radio's volume knob doesn't. However, the same person would be reluctant to invest in a car whose engine does not always start. In the same way, although a variety of qualities or domains could be argued to be moral in nature, we consider which qualities are more or less essential to the definition.

The question of what qualities define good moral character is ultimately a question about what constitutes morality. That is, to understand what traits define those with good and bad character, one must stipulate the boundaries of morality. On the one hand, some have balked at the notion that morality is a unified construct (Sinnott-Armstrong & Wheatley, 2012; Stich, this volume). And as such, it might seem intractable to clearly delineate what behavioral domains are or are not relevant to morality. On the other hand, if one takes a functionalist approach to defining morality by answering what morality (and in turn, moral character judgment) is for, the boundaries of what is and is not relevant to morality may come into sharper focus. Taking such a functionalist approach, Haidt and Kesebir (2010) argue that moral systems have the ultimate goal of keeping individuals' immoral impulses in check so as to make social systems function. But even those who have taken more of a micro approach on morality by considering what characterizes morally-relevant behaviors have also concluded that morality resides in one person's relationship to another (see Rai, this volume). For example, Gray, Young, and Waytz (2012) argue that moral infractions are understood through a common schema, a dyadic template that involves an agentic wrongdoer and a passive victim. Combining both perspectives, one

understands morality as an inherently social concern that offers normative prescriptions for how people should and should not relate to one another.

But even if morality's broader purpose is social, many have been quick to note that not all (im)moral actions exist in social contexts (e.g., Alicke, 2012). If so, it may call into question the degree to which moral character is understood through a social lens. For example, urinating on a holy book, masturbating with an American flag, or sprinkling a former pet's ashes over one's meal are all actions that strike many as immoral, even if the social victims are difficult to identify in such solitary activities. Although observing such victimless wrongs may still entail an automatic identification of a victim (Gray, Schein, & Ward, 2014), our character-based perspective on morality suggests that the social victims need not be found directly in the consequences of the actions. That is, we stress that moral evaluation is not merely in the service of prescribing and proscribing specific actions. Instead, it is a concern with identifying morally trustworthy and untrustworthy people. As such, some actions may be labeled as immoral not because they directly victimize someone, but because they reflect a flawed moral-cognitive machinery that is likely to bring harm to others in the future. In other words, we suspect that even those who override the initial impulse to see harm in victimless wrongs may be reluctant to place social trust in the perpetrators. Few would see "Bible-urinator" as evaluatively neutral when it comes to selecting a babysitter (cf., Doris, 2002). It is for a similar reason that attempted (but unrealized) harms are morally vilified. A terrorist whose plot was foiled may have caused no one any harm, but the probability of his doing so in the future is likely perceived to be relatively high.

Combining these character-focused and social perspectives on morality, we argue that what differentiates moral dimensions from other dimensions of personality – and thus what

people focus on in their assessments of moral character – are those characteristics deemed to be *socially essential*. Positive personality characteristics can range from those that are essential and non-negotiable for long-term social investment to those that are merely preferable or optional. Although many of us would gravitate toward potential friends who are attractive, talented, or funny, we are willing to form close friendships even with those who do not meet one or all of these criteria. These are pluses, but not musts. In contrast, most of us would not be willing to invest in people who are callous, insulting, or conniving. This is because people likely have thresholds for others' compassion, empathy, and trustworthiness, below which we would rather abandon such relationships instead of investing in them further.

If it is the case that assessments of moral character are determinations of whether a person is worthy of long-term social investment, then our perspective suggests there should be a strong overlap between what traits are most moral and what traits are most socially essential. We describe three preliminary efforts to examine empirically what qualities are central, peripheral, or unrelated to moral character, and whether what differentiates such qualities is the degree to which they are socially-essential in nature. In one study, we exposed 186 undergraduates at the University of California, Berkeley to 40 positive personality traits. Participants rated all traits on several dimensions, two of which are relevant to our current interests. They indicated to what extent each trait was morally relevant, and how *essential* each trait was by indicating their willingness to pursue a relationship with a person, even if they were NOT characterized by the trait. As expected, the two dimensions were extremely tightly correlated, $r(38) = .87$. A quality's moral connotation and social essentialism were nearly one and the same.

In another study, we experimentally manipulated the perceived morality of traits. We identified 13 traits that were relatively ambiguous in their moral connotation. For example, people differ in whether they think *reasonable* is or is not indicative of someone's moral character. We first presented people with 13 traits that were clearly moral (e.g., honorable) or clearly non-moral (e.g., imaginative), and explicitly labeled the traits as such. Participants then saw the 13 ambiguous traits, which we gave the contrasting label to—"moral" for those who had first viewed the non-moral traits, and "non-moral" for those who had first viewed the moral traits. Framing the same trait as moral prompted people to see it as more socially essential than when it was framed as non-moral.

In a third investigation, community participants were given sixty traits and asked to rate how characteristic each was of someone they liked – i.e., someone in whom they would invest time and interpersonal resources (Hartley, Furr, Helzer, Jayawickreme, Velasquez, & Fleeson, in press). What was first notable was that moral traits and corresponding immoral traits clustered at the top and bottom of the list, respectively; traits that were instead related to competence and affability filled in the middle ranks. Looking more carefully at which moral traits tended to be at the top of bottom of the list, we gain a clearer picture of what moral dimensions are indeed most socially essential. Traits related to interpersonal trust (honesty, fairness, and trusting) and interpersonal distrust (unfaithful, cruel) were at the top and bottom of the rankings, respectively. Other moral traits that did not relate to how people treat others, but instead people's more general dispositions (e.g., grateful, wholesome) were more middling in their perceived necessity.

This suggests that moral traits related to trustworthiness—a quality of those who can be counted on to behave in fair and predictable ways—may be the most socially essential, and as such most core to conceptions of moral character. If so, we might expect to see evidence that

people are particularly attuned to the trustworthiness of others. We see three distinct lines of work as promoting this conclusion. First, trustworthiness is a core component of one of two primary dimensions underlying social cognition and person perception broadly (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). Second, people automatically assess others' trustworthiness from brief exposure to targets' faces (Engell, Haxby, & Todorov, 2007), an efficiency that highlights the importance of such assessments to social relations. Third, people reason quite efficiently when others fail to display untrustworthy behavior—overcoming the fundamental attribution error (Fein, 1996) and the confirmation bias (Brown & Moore, 2000)—leading some to posit an evolved cheater detection system (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). In other words, effectively identifying who is versus who is not trustworthy may be sufficiently important to have been selected for evolutionarily. Of course, what form such trustworthiness takes, whether its concrete instantiation is universal or culturally variable, and what characterizes the circumstances in which breaking trust is acceptable (or even morally advisable) is not answered by this perspective. But by understanding that trust is seen as a core feature of worthwhile social targets, it suggests that understanding the details of how we determine others' trustworthiness (as opposed to, say, their gratitude) will give us a clearer picture of what contributes to assessments of moral character.

Implications of and Questions Raised by the Present Account

Viewing moral judgment as an exercise in determining whether others have socially essential character traits offers a lens by which to consider a number of questions in more detail. We discuss four here. First, the socially-essential account accommodates both universalism and pluralism in people's moral codes. Although there are a core set of qualities that describe those who make dependable social relationship partners (e.g., trustworthy, fair), social groups may

vary in how such qualities are properly enacted. For example, although most people will agree that fairness is a core value to promote within societies, people may vary in whether they believe a respect for authority or ability is *the fair* way to define social hierarchy. Of course, there is also likely to be some variability in different cultures' conception of what qualities are socially essential. One question for future research is whether there exists a relationship—either positive or negative—between the degree of cross-cultural variability in the perceived essentialness of a trait and the likelihood that the trait is seen as essential in any given culture. For example, those from interdependent cultures may be more likely to see pridefulness as socially dangerous and guilt-proneness as an encourager of social harmony than are those from independent cultures (Mesquita, De Leersnyder, & Albert, 2014). Does the cultural variability surrounding these prescriptions suggest that prescriptive norms encouraging or discouraging such traits are likely to be less strong than those governing moral universals? Or instead, in light of such cultural variability, are such qualities moralized more because they are diagnostic of one's commitment to one's in-group and its norms?

Second, if the task of moral judgment is to deduce whether a person has socially-essential traits, then qualities that are not themselves socially essential—but that signal the presence or absence of such essential properties—may become moralized as well. For example, although hedonism need not interfere with the quality of social relationships (Schwartz, 2006) some people—especially conservatives (Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012)—pass moral judgment on those who prioritize the pursuit of pleasure. At first blush, this appears to be at odds with our account. But once one considers that many hedonists actually are socially disagreeable—those identified by Ksendzova, Iyer, Hill, Wojcik, and Howell (2015) as *maladaptive hedonists*—and that even those hedonists who are not disagreeable tend to reject

conservative, group-binding moral ideals like respect for authority and in-group loyalty, it becomes apparent that hedonists are likely to lack a number of these qualities that many find socially essential. By accepting that acts are judged on the basis of what they imply about moral character, not necessarily on the moral consequences that they directly cause, it is easier to understand why acts that merely signal the potential absence of socially-essential personality characteristics will themselves become moralized.

Third, if good moral character is deemed essential for pursuing a relationship with someone, but one does not know another's moral character before interacting with him or her, then this would seem to offer up a conundrum. Wouldn't people be constantly discouraged from expanding their social networks if candidates for such expansion are of unknown moral character? Of course, there are steps that people can take to reduce the risk inherent in wading into novel social territory. People can find out others' opinions of a potential social investment, or test them in smaller ways. But people must be motivated to explore new opportunities and seek out this potentially-reassuring information to begin with, or decide whether to give someone a chance when trusted social networks cannot provide this information.

One way out of this conundrum is to approach new individuals with an optimistic outlook on their moral character (Critcher & Dunning, 2014). In recent work, people say that they "assume the best" about certain positive traits in others until such high hopes are proven wrong. More important, people tend to endorse this strategy more for moral traits than for non-moral ones (Critcher & Dunning, 2015). But when it comes to actually giving others the benefit of the doubt, it seems that people apply such hopeful expectations when considering specific individuals but not when pondering humanity in general. This bias may be functional: Given social relationships are pursued with individuals (instead of all of humanity), optimism about

their moral character may be a helpful nudge in pushing one to at least preliminarily test out the goodness of a prospective friend.

Fourth, if people are only interested in investing in individuals who have sufficiently solid moral character, just how strong of a moral character is it necessary for them to have? Note that one's social interactions do not merely involve other people; they also involve the self. Furthermore, the self provides a useful and omnipresent comparison standard by which we make sense of others (Dunning & Cohen, 1992; Dunning & Hayes, 1996). A person who does not donate to charity is likely to find a \$150 check to the American Cancer Society to be generous, whereas one who gives away 20% of her income may be less impressed. Given that self-views offer a natural context by which to evaluate others, it is likely that judgments of others' social investment value will be determined by how their credentials compare to the self's.

The trick is that people often possess an inflated, rather than accurate, perceptions of their own strengths and weaknesses (Critcher, Helzer, & Dunning, 2011; Dunning, 2005). Given that others are unlikely to stack up well against this aggrandized standard, the same psychological tactics that make people feel worthy in their own eyes may diminish their perceptions of others' worthiness. These self-enhancing views, writ large, might lead people to unnecessarily dismiss others as having insufficient moral character. But recent research suggests a moderator of self-enhancement that may alleviate such a tendency. Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, and Vredenburg (1995) first documented that people compare themselves more humbly against a specific individual (e.g., an unknown student seated nearby) than against a population of others from which that individual was drawn (e.g., all students). So, while the typical college student is likely to see herself as more studious than her peers, she will not necessarily see herself as more studious than any particular peer against whom she compares herself. Furthermore, people rate

themselves more humbly when offering ratings of themselves and another individual at the same time, compared to when people make those self and social judgments at different points in time (Critcher & Dunning, 2015). Highlighting how such humility is functional in light of the socially essential account, both tendencies were stronger for moral traits (Critcher & Dunning, 2014, 2015). In other words, people temper their own moral self-views so as to avoid preemptively dismissing specific individuals as unworthy of social investment.

Conclusions

Judgments of moral character provide rich information about others' likely reactions and behaviors across a range of situations, ultimately informing decisions about whether to invest in social relationships with them. In this chapter, we have brought forth empirical evidence in support of this functionalist view of moral evaluation, and have reviewed recent research illuminating the process and focus of that search. We argue that moral character evaluation involves both a general assessment of the soundness of a person's moral-cognitive machinery, as well as a more specific assessment of the appropriateness of the outputs of that machinery. By appreciating that the study of moral evaluation must move beyond the question of "What makes acts moral or immoral?" to "What characterizes those of high or low moral character?", we expect that future research will be able to uncover additional strategies that social perceivers use to determine whether others are morally good people and thus worthy of social investment.

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