

Literature Review

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The eternal question of what it means to be a good person and the never-ending quest to become one are part of what it means to be human. We are constantly striving to improve ourselves, or at least we should be. Especially in our modern world of political and ecological uncertainty, and catastrophe after catastrophe, this question becomes ever more critical. In the following literature review, I will be giving a review of the field of moral psychology, a recently emerged discipline aimed to explore how humans define morality and make moral decisions from a psychological perspective. I found my first source through searching for how people defined “good” and “bad” behavior, and from there I looked at other sources referenced by that text. I jumped from text to text after that, exploring the references of each article I came across, until I felt I had a relatively complete picture of the field. In this review, I will first explore the question of what it means to be a “good” or “bad” person according to different theories of human morality. Next, I will cover the history of the field and how it’s evolved, and I will conclude with the major debate occurring in the field today: intuitionism (people make moral decisions through immediate, snap judgments) versus rationalism (judgements are arrived at through reasoning and logic).

Theories of Human Morality

There are several theories behind human morality, and in the next paragraph I will focus on two main ones. The first is the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), put forth by Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and others. They define MFT as “a nativist, cultural-developmental, intuitionist, and pluralist approach to the study of morality” (Graham et

al). As such, there are four claims to the Moral Foundations Theory – nativism, cultural learning, intuitionism, and pluralism. Nativism is the idea that humans have innate morality: there are neural pathways in our brains that prime us to be moral creatures and to have certain moral values. Cultural learning is when these set pathways are changed and shaped by experience. MFT is based on the Social Intuitionist Model (SIM) rather than the rationalist theory, both of which I will explain in more depth later. Without going into too much detail on the SIM, MFT proposes that moral judgements are made through “rapid, automatic moral intuitions” (Graham et al). It is also a pluralist approach, rather than a monist one. When the field was first developed, Lawrence Kohlberg, the father of moral psychology, took a monist approach, proposing that justice was the single foundation humanity morality was based on. By contrast, MFT is a pluralist theory; they propose that care/harm, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation, and fairness/cheating are the foundations of human morality (Graham et al). In other words, people regard caring, loyalty, respecting authority, being fair, and being virtuous as morally correct while their opposites would be regarded as morally wrong. In summary, MFT proposes that there is a first draft of morality at birth (nativism) that is then edited through experience (cultural learning). This first draft is based on several foundations of moral behavior (pluralism), and moral judgements are made immediately (intuitionism).

The primary opponent to the MFT is the morality-as-cooperation theory. Oliver Curry argues that because natural selection has fostered cooperation from the very first multicellular organisms, modern day humans are evolutionarily primed to cooperate (29). The morality-as-cooperation model predicts that humans will view behaviors that exhibit cooperation – “helping your family, being loyal to your group, reciprocating favors, being

brave, deferring to authority, dividing disputed resources” – as morally good and will view anything that opposes cooperation – “neglecting your family, betraying your group, cheating, being cowardly, rebelling against authority, being unfair, and stealing” – as morally bad (Curry 39). He lists relations with kin, engaging in mutualist behaviors, exchange, and conflict resolution as the four major domains of human morality, or the four major foundations to borrow terminology from the MFT. Curry proposes that humans have evolved to live with genetic relatives and thus the problems of allocating resources among family becomes central, and he asserts that doing so equitably is a moral good (30). In that same way, coordinating activities to benefit yourself as well as others (mutualism), fostering reciprocity (exchange), and resolving conflicts are all seen as moral goods (Curry 31). These two differing approaches (morality-as-cooperation and the Moral Foundations Theory) offer two perspectives of human morality, although neither actually give any data to support their claims.

The first actual study I found in the moral psychology field, titled “The Cognitive and Cultural Foundations of Moral Behavior,” aimed to address this gap. It is an ethnographic study surveying over 600 people from eight different field sites from around the world. The field sites represented a variety of different religions – Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and unaffiliated – as well as a number of different economic models, from predominantly foraging communities to the fully market reliant. In their survey, they found that generous, helpful, honest, respectful, loving, and kind were the most popular descriptors of morally good behavior, while theft, dishonesty, violence, and the use of drugs/alcohol were the most popular for morally bad behavior (Puryzecki et al). Their research shows the most common moral values across various cultures and posits that religion has the strongest influence on

moral behavior, although more research would have to be done to fully substantiate this claim.

The Evolution of Ideas in Moral Psychology

To understand the current debate, one must understand the history of the field. Jean Claude Piaget was the first to study moral development in children; he started researching in the 1930s but wasn't published until 1965. He found that younger children were objective in their moral judgements, seeing things in black and white and sticking to established rules and behaviors, but as they got older, they were able to view things more subjectively (Cortese 110). Nearly a decade later, Lawrence Kohlberg, heralded as the father of moral psychology, published his critical paper on the moral development process of adults in 1971. In his study, he established the cognitive-development theory of moral judgement: the idea that humans make moral decisions through reasoned judgement, known today as the rationalist theory. Kohlberg proposed six stages of moral development in adults, with the highest being those who utilize "a principled understanding of fairness that rests on the free-standing logic of equality and reciprocity" (Cortese 111). Kohlberg's theory has been critiqued for many reasons since his pioneering paper was first published. In the 1980s, Cortese summarized the bulk of critique against Kohlberg, arguing that his theory was unrealistic because it was not applicable to everyday life, painted the western, white man as the moral model, and ignored social and cultural factors of morality. First, Kohlberg's survey was based on hypothetical moral dilemmas rather than everyday situations, setting up moral decision making "as [a] mathematical equat[ion] rather than judgment, wisdom, and transcendental

creativity” (114). Secondly, Kohlberg surveyed only western, white men, so his model does not account for most of the world’s population, failing to incorporate the moral values of women, people of color, middle- or lower-class individuals, and those from non-western countries. Instead, he took the beliefs of white men as the moral norms for everyone, asserting that justice, a western and masculine value, was the moral foundation of all humanity and designing his stages such that a high level of abstractionism, common in western culture only and dependent on high education levels, was necessary to reach the highest stages (112). Because of the limited views and experiences of his subjects, Kohlberg’s theory also fails to account for an unjust world; his stages assume a utopia without patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, racism, or poverty (113). Cortese concludes that, as a result of all of the above, Kohlberg’s theory cannot be taken as wholly, or even partially, correct. He closes with a critique of capitalism, stating that an autonomous self, able to make their own moral decisions independently and without regard for societal convention, is impossible in the capitalist, hierarchical world we live in (119). Although Kohlberg has been criticized by many, including Cortese, over the years, his ideas still lay at the base of the field until the turn of the century when the social-intuitionist model was developed.

The Field Today: Intuitionism vs. Rationalism

While the rationalist theory captured most of the tone of the conversation for decades, today the social-intuitionist model put forth by Joseph Haidt in 2001 holds more weight. While the rationalist theory asserts that moral judgements are made through reasoning and deliberation, the SIM proposes that “moral judgment is caused by quick moral intuitions and is followed (when needed) by slow, ex post facto moral reasoning” (Haidt

817). His claim is substantiated by a study in which he noted individuals' immediate condemnations of incest, bestiality, and other common social taboos. When probed further, however, his subjects were unable to explain why they disagreed so vehemently, leading him to judge that morality is based on intuition (814). He explains the 6 "links" that make up the social-intuitionist theory: the intuitive judgement link, the post ad hoc reasoning link, the reasoned persuasion link, the social persuasion link, the reasoned judgement link, and the private reflection link. The first four links make up the SIM, while the latter are the reasoning links that rationalist thinkers focus on. In the SIM, however, the last two links (the reasoning one creates to explain one's judgment to oneself or others) are consequential, side effects of that first gut instinct, rather than causal (819). Haidt, creator of the SIM theory, is also one of the fiercest proponents of the Moral Foundations Theory, mentioned earlier in this review.

While some in the field still cling to the rationalist model, most of the academic discourse has turned to Haidt's SIM. However, Darcia Narvaez in her article, "Moral Complexity: The Fatal Attraction of Truthiness and the Importance of Mature Moral Functioning," summarizes and critiques both the intuitionist and rational theories in order to provide a new alternative: moral imaginism. Narvaez's main critique of the social-intuitionist theory is that it fails to account for the fact that tacit knowledge, knowledge that cannot be explained verbally, does not always equal implicit, intuitive knowledge. People learn through experiences, and they don't always realize what they've learned on a conscious level, but that does not make that knowledge innate (Narvaez 13). She also finds that it oversimplifies moral decision making, focusing on moral judgements of people or situations rather than real-life scenarios that require action and deliberation (Narvaez 9). In her piece "The Social Intuitionist Model: Some Counter-intuitions," Narvaez critiques the SIM for

failing to differentiate between intuitive judgements and social conformity. According to the SIM, “a fully enculturated person is a virtuous person,” but this is a very dangerous position to take up in light of cultures which directly counter moral virtues, for example Nazi Germany (Narvaez “The Social Intuitionist Model” 4). Her main critique of rationalism is that it underscores the role of emotions in moral judgements and is based on hypothetical moral dilemmas rather than real-life, everyday situations (Narvaez “Moral Complexity” 20). In this way, her critique is very much in line with Cortese’s earlier identification of rationalism flaws. She also argues that rationalism ignores tacit knowledge that cannot be explained through reasoning, emotional responses which help dictate moral actions, and gut feelings or intuitions that people often base their decisions on. She ultimately calls for the two theories to combine to form moral imaginism, a theory that uses reasoning as well as emotion and intuition to make moral judgements and engage in moral behavior. Moral imaginism calls for decisions to be made based on evaluating the consequences of one’s actions for oneself and others, as well as taking others’ perspectives into account when making decisions (Narvaez 22).

Conclusion

As evidenced above, there are many competing ideas and theories in the field of moral psychology today. However, this makes sense as the field is relatively new, emerging only in the last 50 or so years as an established branch of psychology. Further research will have to be done to get closer to any definitive answers. I am most intrigued by the debate between intuitionism and rationalism and how Narvaez’ concept of moral imaginism seeks to address this rift. With impending ecological disaster, extremely partisan politics, and an ever-growing class divide, among other things, our nation and our world are facing tough

questions that no one really has answers for. Although many theorize on what could or should be done to address these issues, consensus is nearly impossible to find, and many people seem to be frozen in the face of the magnitude of our problems. The questions of morality have become ever more important in light of this situation. How are these concepts of moral psychology represented in our current society and media? What answers can they give in helping us grow as individuals, a country and a planet? The NBC sitcom *The Good Place* is one example of how our culture today is grappling with the concept of being a good person. The show is based around a misfit group of the recently deceased embarking on a journey of self-improvement, one that the audience goes on right along with them. Through applying concepts of moral psychology to *The Good Place*, one can learn more about both the show and moral psychology; it could also potentially shed some light on where we stand as a culture today and where we go from here.

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