Agentic Morality? The Role of Agency in Contemporary Theories of Moral Behavior

At its core, agency involves the ability to act otherwise in a given situation (Slife & Fisher, 2000). An agentic action becomes a moral action when it is undertaken or evaluated based on an understanding of what is choiceworthy or good. Many psychologists reject agency, opting for a causally deterministic model of behavior, which posits that all behavior can be explained by reference to some combination of genetic, situational, and learning factors. Although this rejection of agency is problematic in any account of behavior, it is especially problematic in an account of morality because deterministic accounts of moral behavior posit all behavior to be the result of causal factors, which eliminates the ability to act otherwise eliminates the agent's evaluation of action as a primary source of behavior and renders the action amoral. Further, deterministic accounts are often unable to provide an account of what is choiceworthy. Without the ability to act otherwise and a standard for moral evaluation, moral behavior and morality become empty constructs.

Because the role of agency is foundational for a theory of moral psychology, it requires a clear explication in any moral psychology. All three contemporary major theoretical perspectives make some attempt to explain this, but their answers are filled with implicit and explicit contradictions, making agency's role unclear in each perspective. In this presentation, I discuss the role of agency in each of the three theoretical perspectives, organizing them from least to most clear. Moral Foundations Theory has the least to say about agency, with Moral Identity theorists being most articulate, and Social Cognitive Domain Theorists falling midway between them.

Moral Foundations Theory

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) is based on Johnathon Haidt's (2001) Social Intuitionist Model, which posits that moral behavior is the outcome of situationally responsive "rapid, automatic evaluations" (Graham et al., 2013) that are based on intuitions developed from the interplay of biology and socialization. Moral reasoning is seen as a "post-hoc process in which we search for evidence to support our initial intuitive reaction" (Haidt, 2007). These "reasonable sounding justifications" (Greene, 2007a) are created because we are relatively unaware of our actual motives and want to persuade others of the morality of our actions, which may potentially lead to a shift in their moral intuitions. Although the Social Intuitionist Model does not deny the possibility of moral reasoning directly influencing one's moral behavior, it posits that explicit moral reasoning is rare and only instigated as a result of social interaction (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt, 2007).

MF theorists use both agentic and deterministic language when describing MFT, rendering their view of agency quite ambiguous. For example, Graham and Haidt (2012) discuss each person being the "first author of his or her own life story," and Greene and Haidt (2002) discuss that moral actions must "spring in a vivid way from the agent's will" (p. 519). These statements contrast with others about "rapid automatic evaluations" (Graham et al., 2013) and "causal effects" (Diessner et al., 2013). These contradictory statements send mixed implicit messages about the role of agency in MFT. Explicitly, Haidt and his colleagues also are not clear on the role agency plays in MFT. They offer two possibilities: reasoned persuasion and the socialization of moral intuitions.

One possibility is that agency occurs through what Haidt and Joseph (2004) call reasoned persuasion, or when individuals consciously act against their moral intuitions. They describe reasoned persuasion as occurring "slowly, deliberately, and fully within conscious awareness"

(p. 57) later clarifying that it is "intentional, effortful, and controllable" and that "the reasoner is aware that it is going on" (Haidt & Kesibir, 2010, p. 10). Thus, reasoned persuasion seems to allow for the possibility that an agent may exercise choice in reasoning and subsequent behavior. This link, however, lacks conceptual clarity. MF theorists do not define what the "will" is or how it is that it comes into being. The lack of depth calls into question whether the will is a central part or a post-hoc addition to MFT. The role of agency is further confused by MF theorists' assertion that reasoned persuasion seldom occurs among lay people, though it may be more common among philosophers (Haidt, 2001). MF theorists seem to be saying that a partial agency may exist in some people some of the time.

Another possibility is that although most moral behavior occurs as a result of automatic intuitions, these intuitions are not simply innately given but are shaped by experience. Typically, the development of moral intuitions is seen as the result of interactions with others such as parents, peers, and the media (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008a, p. 210), rendering the individual as a largely passive recipient of active environmental forces (Graham et al., 2013). At other times, MF theorists discuss the possibility of an agent taking responsibility for the shaping of his or her moral intuitions. Haidt and Joseph (2008) posit that children "actively construct their moral knowledge within a cultural context" (p. 26). Haidt (2003) further clarifies that an individual may choose to "give themselves experiences that over the course of months or years will shape their intuitions and change their judgments" (p. 197). Both statements are strongly agentic, but the process by which intuitions are changed and the reasons for the sake of which one reshapes oneself are left unstated. These statements appear as patches in an area where Haidt and his colleagues have discovered their theory to be insufficient. From our perspective, agency is a central question, not one to be solved by a patch. In all these

explanations, Moral Foundations theorists assign primacy to situational factors, leaving any conception of agency to be weak at best.

MF theorists do not deny agency, but they typically focus on the automaticity of moral intuitions. Despite these theorists' occasional references to agency, agency does not have a clear or vital role in MFT. Within the current theory, only a weak notion of agency seems possible among some people some of the time.

Much like MFT, Social Cognitive Domain Theory (SCDT) references agency, but it is unclear what role it plays in moral judgment or behavior. In particular, SCD theorists account for agency in one of two ways. Some SCD theorists discuss agency as the process of constructing understanding. Others use the concepts of the three domains of social knowledge to conceptualize agency.

Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010) offer an in-depth account of agency, wherein they define agency as "people's understanding and experience of themselves (and others) as agents whose morally relevant actions are based in goals and beliefs" (p. 55). They discuss agency as a process of constructing understandings of one's own harmful behavior. From this definition, we come to understand agency in SCDT as a phenomenological experience where an individual comes to understand him or herself as an autonomous being. This definition of agency leaves it unclear whether agency is merely an epiphenomenal experience, or if it is actually possible to choose to act otherwise in a given situation. Although the explicit inclusion of agency is promising here, there is little substance in these theorists' concept of agency.

Most SCD theorists relegate the experience of agency to a single domain of social knowledge. Recall that SCDT holds that social knowledge can be divided into three rather distinct areas or domains: conventional, moral, and personal. The conventional domain includes

concerns with authority, tradition, and social norms. The moral domain is primarily concerned with issues surrounding justice, rights, and welfare. The personal domain is concerned with privacy, integrity, and bodily control (Smetana, 2006). While the conventional and moral domains are thought to stem from concerns arising from the effects of one's behaviors on others, the personal domain reflects concerns in the area of "personal prerogative and jurisdiction" (Turiel, 2003, p. 33). The key question in the personal domain is how agency will be expressed (Smetana, 2006), but personal prerogatives are seen as unrelated to others' welfare. In contrast, the moral domain is concerned with acts that violate the personal freedoms or agency of others, but nothing is said as to whether these acts are or can be agentically motivated. Among the many ironies that this formulation creates, it is unclear whether SCDT can recognize whether the violation of another's agency is itself an agentic act.

Although SCDT directly addresses the role of agency in moral behavior, these attempts do not clarify the role of agency in SCDT. Pasupathi and Wainryb's (2010) account of agency lacks depth, and the clear distinction between the moral and personal domains further obfuscates the role of agency in SCDT.

In contrast to MFT and SCDT, Moral Identity Theory (MIT) discusses agency in a thoroughgoing way. Several theorists explicitly acknowledge the role of agency. For these theorists, agency plays a meaningful role in the development of moral identity as well as in moral reasoning and deliberation. Despite the overall integration of agency in MIT, there is a consistent theme of moral identity as determinative of moral behavior, posing a contradiction.

Blasi, arguably the founder of this loosely-knit group of theorists, writes at length about agency. He maintains that the relationship between cognition and emotion hinges on a *decision* to act or not, that the meaning of emotions is the result of agentic intervention, and that moral

actions should be intentional (Blasi, 1983; 1999). Countering biologically deterministic views, Blasi (2009) argues that moral functioning could quite plausibly be the "active, agentic, and responsible working of an agent using brain structures as necessary tools" (p. 404). Other MI theorists discuss the role of other agentic constructs as important factors in moral behavior such as decision making (Narvaez, 2008a), choice (Frimer & Walker, 2009), and individual control (Hardy & Carlo, 2011b).

Recall that moral identity is an individual differences variable and refers to the degree to which moral concerns are central to a person's identity. Individuals with a more salient moral identity are thought to be more attuned to situations requiring moral behavior and more likely to exhibit such behavior. Moral identity is developed over time and in response to various situational influences (Colby & Damon, 1993). Despite the importance of situational factors in the development of moral identity, individuals are typically seen as responsible for constructing their own moral identity (Narvaez, 2009). Moral identity theorists consistently use phrases such as "we are producers of our own development" (Lapsley & Hill, 2009, p. 196), "we can choose that with which we identify" (Frimer & Walker, 2009, p. 1669), and "the identity contents one cares most about are actively appropriated into one's core self" (Hardy & Carlo, 2005, p. 236) to convey the centrality of agency in MIT.

One of the distinctive ways that MI theorists include agency is by highlighting the role of moral reasoning or deliberation in moral behavior. Hardy (2010) acknowledges that automatic processes are necessary to function, and then adds, "but, if we throw out conscious reasoning and agency, we may also throw out much that is good in life" (p. 9). Narvaez (2009) proposes school-based programs focusing on moral reasoning to assist youth in increasing moral behavior. She states, "Reason allows us to select the environments that 'tune up' our intuitions, a means to

self-cultivate virtue" (p. 170). Blasi (1983) discusses moral behavior as a consequence of conscious deliberation. Each of these theorists pairs moral reasoning with an explicit acknowledgment of the role of agency, making it clear that agency is central in moral identity theory.

Despite an overall agentic framework for morality, MI theorists occasionally speak of moral identity determining behavior. At times, moral identity is discussed as "compelling" an individual to act morally (Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007), as "producing" moral behavior (Lapsley, 1998), or as the "single most powerful determiner" of moral behavior and judgment (Aquino & Reed, 2002). The deterministic language in these examples suggests that moral identity causes moral behavior. Although this could be conceived of as an agentic process where an individual constructs her moral identity prior to a critical incident in which she "is compelled" to act by her moral identity, this introduction of a causal viewpoint seems contradictory to the way MI theorists discuss agency in other contexts. This adds confusion to the otherwise clearly agentic stance taken by MI theorists.

All of the major theoretical perspectives on morality seem to agree that agency has some role to play in a theory of moral behavior. However, each of them is conflicted as to what that role should be. MF theorists have argued that agency is important in an understanding of morality, but the overwhelming focus on moral intuitions and automatic evaluations provides a very limited role for agency at best. SCD theorists often isolate concerns with agency to the personal domain, leaving ambiguous what role, if any, agency plays in the moral and conventional domains. MI theorists are often quite explicit that agency is a central part of their theory of morality and it is integrated in their understanding of moral identity and moral reasoning. Occasionally, however, MI theorists speak of moral identity in a deterministic way,

obfuscating their otherwise clear stance. This confusion is disheartening as the role of agency is a central question to any theory of moral behavior. Each of these theoretical perspectives would be enhanced by a sustained, serious, and systematic consideration of the role that agency plays in morality.