Towards a unified moral psychology:

An Aristotelian answer to the definitional disagreement

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Abstract: Advances in cognitive neuroscience have cast light on important cognitive processes involved in moral behavior. In response, the field of moral psychology has sought to provide psychologically real accounts of morality and moral behavior that are true to these recent discoveries. These accounts frequently rely on disparate and even contradictory definitions of morality that make unwarranted assumptions about morality that impede its study. We outline four common definitional missteps, highlighting the problematic nature of each: neglecting agency or explicitly discounting its role in morality, defining morality interpersonally such that moral behavior is thought to only exist in interpersonal relationships, conceptualizing morality as synonymous with helping or altruism, and basing accounts of morality on a faulty understanding of human character. We propose an alternative conceptualization of morality based on Aristotle's ethics. Morality, in this light, is understood as an integration of human biology, sociality, and agency, unified in action directed toward an overall conception of "the good." This approach provides a rich theoretical framework for psychological science on morality and facilitates a systematic and unified pursuit of psychologically real accounts of moral behavior.

Towards a unified moral psychology: An Aristotelian answer to the definitional disagreement

Moral psychology is emerging as an increasingly important area of study. Until recently, moral psychology had been relegated to moral philosophy, but recent advances in cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary psychology have ignited new interest in a psychological account of moral behavior. The growing influence of the call for a psychologically realistic account in moral philosophy has also spurred interest in the psychology of morality.

The development of a field of moral psychology is new and has been hampered by being spread across multiple sub-disciplines of psychology, including social, personality, developmental, evolutionary psychology and neuroscience. This has impeded its development as a cohesive field of study (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009), resulting in a high degree of fragmentation and substantial disagreement over the definitions of central terms such as "morality" and "moral behavior." A brief survey of the field returns a range of definitions of morality: some center on issues of justice and fairness, others on caring and harm, and yet others on social consensuses over whether an act is good or evil (Blasi, 1990; Cervone & Tripathi, 2009; Graham et al., 2011; Kahn, 2006; Tisak et al., 2006).

Given the fragmentation of this field of inquiry, we will focus on the three most widely held moral psychology perspectives: Turiel's social-cognitive domain theory, the moral personality approach, and Haidt's social intuitionist model. Although there is little communication across these perspectives, and they differ in important ways, it is fascinating that these three perspectives share four critical and problematic assumptions that drastically impede their grasp of moral psychology: a neglect of moral agency, an exclusively interpersonal definition of morality, the equation of altruism and helping with morality, and the lack of a theory of the good. Our hope is that the resources of theoretical psychology can assist moral

psychologists to fashion a more integrated moral psychology. We do this by offering an Aristotelian approach to moral psychology that incorporates the best in the three reigning perspectives and transcends their problematic assumptions. Through an integration of human biology, sociality, and agency, unified in action directed toward an overall conception of "the good," this approach offers a rich theoretical framework that can facilitate a systematic and unified pursuit of a psychologically realistic account of moral behavior.

Major Perspectives in Moral Psychology

Contemporary moral psychology harks back to Piaget and Kohlberg's pioneering theories of moral development. In post-Kohlbergian moral psychology, there are three major perspectives, which we will describe now.

Social-Cognitive Domain Theory

Turiel and his followers adopt Piaget and Kohlberg's universalist view of morality (Killen, Margie, & Sinno, 2006), defining morality primarily in relation to justice and notions of helping/harming. Turiel (1983) initially defined morality as "prescriptive judgments of justice, rights, and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to each other" (p. 3) and later elaborated his view to include three domains: the moral, conventional, and personal (Turiel, 2002, 2003). The specifically moral domain is conceptualized as universally applicable obligations related to harm, fairness, and rights that are situated within one's social relationships (Smetana, 2006). Convention is distinguished from the moral domain by its contextual relativity, changeability, and contingency on rules and authority (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2003). The personal domain is distinguished from morality because it affects only the agent and is seen as outside the area of social regulation (Nucci & Turiel, 2000; see also Tisak et al., 2006).

The Moral Personality Perspective

This moral personality perspective is a very loosely knit group (S. Hardy, personal communication, December 5, 2012) that does not have a cohesive theoretical perspective, but broadly conceptualizes moral psychology in terms of moral identity and moral character. Advocates of the moral personality approach are often critical of the narrowness of Turiel's definition of morality. Moral identity or personality is defined in many different ways but typically centers around a self-expressive commitment to promote others' welfare (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998), which is studied in terms of the characteristics of a supposed moral person (e.g. Aquino & Reed, 2002; Schlenker, Miller, & Johnson, 2009) and self-perceptions of morality (Monin & Jordan, 2009; Skitka & Morgan, 2009). Moral personality is frequently defined in terms of specific prosocial behaviors (e.g., Aquino, Freeman, Reed II, Lim, & Felps, 2009) or an "altruistic personality" (Carlo, 2006; Hardy & Carlo, 2011), and moral emotions (e.g., Adolphs, 2009; Garcia & Ostrosky-Solís, 2006).

The Social Intuitionist Model

While social-cognitive domain theory and the moral personality perspective endorse more developmental views of morality, Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model is grounded in biological and cognitive views of morality, with emphases on moral intuitions, reasoning, and judgment. In Haidt's view (2008; Haidt & Bjorklund, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004), morality is an evolutionary adaptation that facilitates cooperation and social cohesion rather than selfishness and lack of commitment. He draws on extensive research that emphasizes that moral behavior is most often based on quick, automatic responses rather than deliberation. On his view, moral reasoning serves to validate and explain intuitive judgments (Haidt & Bjorklund, 2007), but deliberation only occasionally directly influences moral judgments (Haidt, 2001, 2004). A person's intuitions are influenced by others' moral judgments and reasoning as well. Social

intuitionists define morality along five domains: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Graham et al., 2011). The value placed on each domain is thought to vary cross culturally such that some cultures or people focus almost entirely on a few domains while others focus on different domains.

Four Shared and Problematic Assumptions

Though each of the perspectives varies in its definitions of morality and which aspects it considers most salient, they are unified by four unacknowledged, culturally based assumptions about the nature of morality. We now turn to examine these assumptions.

Lack of Agency

It is astonishing that contemporary moral psychology almost entirely neglects the role of agency in morality. Moral psychologists do not outright deny the possibility of agency, but they are distinctly casual in their treatment of agency. This neglect is even more striking because a moral psychology must account for responsibility, and responsibility is contingent on agency.

Agency is only addressed implicitly in social-cognitive domain theory and the moral personality perspective. For the former, questions of agency are critical to the assessment of moral responsibility for just or unjust acts, and for the conferral of benefits or harms to others. The only area in which agency is explicitly discussed in social-cognitive domain theory is in the personal domain, sometimes labeled "personal freedom." Turiel, however, separates this domain from morality (Nucci & Turiel, 2000), implicitly framing morality as the violation of others' personal freedom or agency but not making clear whether this act is done intentionally by a moral agent. Moral personality scholars do not outright deny the possibility of agency; however, they leave unclear the degree to which one is responsible for one's own moral personality.

The social intuitionist model does not deny the possibility of agency, but Haidt has steadfastly focused on the speed and automaticity of moral intuitions that guide moral behavior. He largely ignores the role of choice in how these intuitions are formed and followed. At his most explicit, he states that moral judgment is "a product of quick and automatic intuitions that then give rise to slow, conscious moral reasoning" (Haidt & Bjorklund, 2007). He sees the purpose of this conscious moral reasoning primarily to be finding reasons to justify the individual's intuitive judgment and influencing the intuitions and later judgments of others (Haidt, 2001). In his view, moral judgments are determined by automatic intuitions, which are consequently determined by the judgments and reasoning of others, leaving precious little room for agency. The social intuitionist model does allow that reasoning can influence intuitions, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

Morality necessarily presupposes responsibility and agency. Although there are many definitions of agency, at a minimum, it involves the ability to act otherwise in a given situation. Thus, agency entails the ability to choose between alternatives, for which the agent is held responsible. Surely, a moral psychology must recognize, describe, and explain how evaluating an act as moral or immoral turns on the agent's intentions and choices rather than leaving this crucial concept implicit and vague.

Interpersonal Morality

Morality is commonly thought to deal primarily with interpersonal relationships. For example, Kahn (2006) asserts that in spite of disagreements about morality, "people understand that morality deals with people's relationships with other people" (p. 461). Each of the three perspectives defines morality interpersonally.

Social cognitive domain theorists define morality interpersonally. Turiel's (1983) famous definition of morality as "prescriptive judgments of justice, rights, and welfare" (p. 3) grounds morality in principles meant to guide interpersonal relationships. In his later work, Turiel (2002) continues to define morality in explicitly interpersonal terms as "how people ought to relate to each other" (p.2). As already noted, the personal domain is distinguished from the moral domain, indicating that concerns involving only oneself are not moral. The personal domain is morally relevant only when violated by others (Nucci & Turiel, 2000).

Because the moral personality perspective lacks a unifying theory, it is difficult to epitomize its views. Nonetheless, scholars in this group tend to define morality and moral concepts interpersonally as well. For example, Hart, Atkins, and Ford (1998) define moral identity to only include actions that promote or protect others' welfare. Similarly, Carlo (2006) sees morality as showing care for others, with beneficence and altruism as bases of morality. Both definitions focus on the interactions between self and others as the basis of morality.

Haidt's Social Intuitionist Model is also based an interpersonal definition of morality. Haidt considers morality to be an evolved psychological mechanism that works to "suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible" (Haidt, 2008, p. 70). In this, he expresses the very modern assumption that the conflict between individual and social interests is at the center of morality. This viewpoint further assumes that the individual is the basic social unit. He and other biological/cognitive psychologists see morality as an adaptation that supports group cooperation and commitment (Haidt, 2001; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009; Wong, 2009). In fairness, Haidt does acknowledge the presence of non-interpersonal aspects of morality that are present in non-Western cultures (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). Among Haidt's five principles of morality, four focus on interpersonal relationships (i.e. harm/care, fairness/reciprocity,

ingroup/loyalty, and authority/respect) while one may be interpreted with a focuses on the intrapersonal (purity/sanctity; Haidt & Graham, 2007). Haidt does not clarify this question, and the predominance of the interpersonal suggests that he has accepted this modern Western conception of morality.

Though it is endorsed to some degree by all three perspectives, the assumption of interpersonal morality is culturally limited and problematic. Much of morality does deal with interpersonal matters, but some moral matters issues are rightly seen as intrapersonal (Greenewood, 2011). Ritualized washings, masturbation, and suicide do not involve interaction with other people, but they are commonly judged as morally relevant. For example, temperance is primarily focused on one's responses to one's appetites and emotions. Reverence relates to one's responses to entities or happenings that transcend both the individual and the interpersonal realm, including God, the cosmos, and death (Woodruff, 2001). These examples have implications for interpersonal relating, but they reach significantly beyond human social relations. Defining morality interpersonally excludes significant aspects of human morality. All three contemporary perspectives, however, make this misstep in their definitions of morality.

Equating Helping with Morality

The idea that morality is synonymous with helping or altruism is a common fixture of modern views. This proposition is made in two distinct but equally problematic ways: all helping is moral and morality is only helping. Each of the perspectives equate morality and helping to some degree.

Turiel (1983) does not explicitly state that he sees all helping as morality, but he does include welfare concerns as a core component of his definition of morality. In moral identity, Carlo (2006) places altruism and prosocial behaviors at the heart of moral identity and later

makes it clear that he sees them as nearly synonymous (Carlo, Pytlikzillig, Roesch, & Dienstbier, 2009). Haidt (2007) places morality opposite to selfishness, implying that selflessness or helping is morality. Summing up a large body of research, Descioli and Kurzban (2012) conclude that there is a tendency among researchers to see morality as a part of altruism. Although this view is frequently implicit, some explicitly equate helping with morality (Conway & Peetz, 2012; Haidt, 2001; Rachels, 2000; Tisak et al., 2006).

In addition to equating morality and helping through definitions, moral psychologists also confound them in their empirical research. Morality is most often operationalized as helping behavior (Graham et al., 2011) such as volunteering (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998) and charitable giving (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009; Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007). Although these ways of studying morality may not be intended to capture the entire moral domain, their frequency suggests that researchers take a narrow, restrictive view of what counts as moral behavior.

Asserting that all helping is moral is problematic. Parents helping their children to the point of undermining the child's self-sufficiency, helping a friend pay her debt by stealing money from a neighbor, and assisting in murder are all examples in which helping is obviously not the moral choice. Although helping is frequently morally praiseworthy, helping is not necessarily moral because the morality of helping is more a matter of the end one is trying to attain than the activity of helping. On the flip side, equating morality with helping is also problematic. Although helping is often morally valued, there are many other aspects of moral behavior that are not encompassed by helping, such as promise-keeping, proper deference to authority or experience, and developing one's personal capacities.

Poor Understanding of the Good

Perhaps the most significant difficulty of contemporary moral psychology is the lack of any theory of the good. A theory of the good answers the question of what makes moral behavior worthwhile. Social-cognitive domain theory emphasizes justice, beneficence, and avoiding harm, but what is it that makes behavior oriented to these ends worthwhile? Why is justice better than injustice, beneficence better than maleficence? This perspective on moral psychology seems to require a theory of the good to account for the worthiness of its central components, yet it lacks such a theory.

Proponents of moral personality are not much better off. Narvaez (2006) is the most articulate about the human good, even using the term *eudaimonia*, but she does not present a clear description of the human good. Other authors endorse virtue and character in moral psychology, but they have little to say about why it is better to have a virtuous character or how that might relate to the human good.

Haidt's view of the human good is more explicit, but even less satisfying. He sees morality as an evolutionary adaptation, which means that moral capacities were selected for. In other words, moral behavior amounts to a survival and reproduction strategy. There is much to recommend this view, but if it is taken as a complete account of morality, moral behavior becomes simply a means to the end of successful reproduction, which is not a moral theory worth having. If successful reproduction is the highest good, then any number of means can serve that end, including deceit, cuckoldry, and slavery.

Human beings need more than a list of moral behaviors, principles, traits or inheritances. As social, agentic, self-interpreting creatures, humans need to have an understanding of what makes morality worthwhile. We need an account of what it is to live a good life and to have a

good society. What are the ends for the sake of which it is reasonable to act in the particular ways that we count as moral?

Aristotelian Insights (16-17)

Up to this point, we have reviewed four problematic assumptions of contemporary moral psychology theories. It will not surprise you that we see Aristotle's (1999) eudaimonic theory as a way to overcome the problematic assumptions current in moral psychology and to provide a cohesive and inspiring framework.

In contrast to other moral psychologies, Aristotle centers his theory of ethics in a systematic and thorough understanding of what is good. For this reason, we begin, as he did, with a theory of the good. Aristotle theory is famously telic, beginning with the good, which he describes as "that for the sake of which everything else is done" (1097a 18-19). Aristotle argued that humans have a purposive end: "we take the proper function of man to be a certain kind of life" (1098a 12-13), which is the human good. The only good which is "never chosen as a means to something else" (1097a 31-32) is *eudaimonia* or flourishing as a human being. *Eudaimonia* is best understood as "an activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue" (1098a 16-17). Thus, the good is situated not as an end state but as an activity. *Eudaimonia* is the fullest expression of human nature, which he summarized by describing humans as rational, social creatures. The virtues are the characteristics that make it possible to fully instantiate our rational and social nature.

Aristotle had a great deal to say about agency. He details the conditions and expression of agency in books 3 and 6 of the Nicomachean Ethics. Moreover, agency is implicit in several of Aristotle's key concepts. Deliberation and rational choice, inherent in *phronesis*, are strongly agentic. The good is something which is intentionally and explicitly chosen and pursued. Human

rationality is agentic because humans are creatures that act for the sake of reasons, and those reasons relate to what we see as choiceworthy.

Aristotelian theory defines morality to include both individual and interpersonal aspects. Living a *eudaimonic* life involves cultivating one's best self, which also entails acting well towards others. Although many people read Aristotle's virtues as focused on the intricacies of interpersonal life, he had much to say about the choiceworthiness of character development and inner harmony above and beyond their positive interpersonal expressions.

The centrality and plurality of the good for Aristotle makes it easy to avoid the trap of defining morality in terms of helping. Helping is only good when it serves the overall good. There are many goods to be pursued, and beneficence is only good when it is compatible with other goods, all things considered. Aristotle would consider helping to be one among many possible virtuous actions among which a *phronimos* would deliberate. Generosity is relativized to context and loyalty for Aristotle, rather than constituting an absolute moral demand that is categorically unrealistic psychologically.

Aristotle's eudaimonic theory overcomes the four problematic assumptions common to all three contemporary approaches moral psychology. He gives a rich theory of the good, the centrality of which guides human agency and provides a reasoned account of what is choiceworthy. For Aristotle, the focus on living the good life transcends the interpersonal realm and is co-extensive with a complete human life. Finally, helping is contextualized within the many goods humans pursue. This understanding of *eudaimonia* provides the basis for a psychologically real study account of morality.

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