

The Good Life in Moral Psychology: Implicit and Explicit Perspectives

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A theory of the good explains what constitutes a good life, addresses what is choiceworthy in life, and indicates which kinds of actions should be engaged in to achieve it. Individuals inescapably operate out of an assumption of the kinds of actions that are moral. Through reflection and conversation, they may come to explicitly acknowledge, articulate, and perhaps alter their theory of the good if they choose. Similarly, psychological accounts of morality rely heavily on a theory of the good to indicate what the *telos* or endpoint of moral action is, indicating what the good life would look like if individuals acted morally. Absent a theory of the good, a moral theory would be unable to explain why actions were deemed as moral or immoral nor for what sake someone should engage in moral action.

Philosophers have proposed several different theories of the good including Hume's sentimentalism, Kant's rationalism, Bentham and Mill's consequentialism and utilitarianism, and Aristotle's eudaimonic theory. Hume's sentimentalism posits that the morality of an action is determined by reference to moral emotions of approval or disapproval of a third party observing an action. Reason enters in only after an initial emotional evaluation of the situation. Kant countered Hume's proposition by proposing reason not emotion to be the center of moral judgment. Rationalism is based on respect for persons and the categorical imperative, which holds that a behavior is moral if and only if that behavior can be recommended to all humans universally in a similar situation. In comparison, consequentialism, appraises the morality of an action by considering positive and negative consequences the action will have on others. This leads consequentialists to seek to maximize the good, often framed as pleasure, for the greatest number of people. Finally, Aristotle's eudaimonic theory evaluates a behavior as morally

praiseworthy or blameworthy according to the degree it contributes to individual and societal flourishing. In a given situation, morally praiseworthy action involves accurately perceiving the situation, deliberating well about which virtue is required, and then successfully executing the choice. The same act can thus be appraised as either virtuous or vicious depending on the context of a situation and which virtues are most relevant to the situation. *Eudaimonia*, or flourishing, in turn, is achieved as an individual lives a characteristically virtuous life.

In this presentation, I examine how each of the three major theoretical perspectives in moral psychology conceptualizes the good life. I explore the degree to which Social Domain Theory, Moral Foundations Theory, and Moral Identity Theory explicitly endorse an established theory of the good and the degree to which they integrate this theory of the good with their views on morality. I conclude that all three theoretical perspectives would benefit by a more serious consideration of the interface between their moral theory and their theory of the good.

Social Domain Theory

Turiel's (2002) Social Domain Theory (SDT) does not explicitly endorse a theory of the good. SD theorists tend to take a liberal individualist approach to the study of morality, but they do not acknowledge this value commitment, nor do they formalize it into a theory of the good. This makes it difficult to understand the nature of the good life as seen in SDT.

SD theorists take a liberal individualist approach to the study of morality but do not acknowledge a theory of the good. Liberal individualism is a philosophical rather than a political position. It is marked by extreme focus on the personal rights and welfare of the individual. SDT's foundational definition of morality as "prescriptive judgments of justice, rights, and welfare" (Turiel, 1983, p. 4), makes clear its commitment to individual rights. Further, SDT's theory of the good hinges on an understanding of the two main concerns of the moral domain:

harm/care and fairness/justice. To better understand the consistency of SDT researchers with these domains, we analyzed over 20 articles and book chapters written by SDT theorists, looking for the goods they implicitly espoused in their writing. Following are the goods espoused: justice, social coordination, fairness, human welfare, forgiveness, avoiding harm, the sacredness of life, equality, respect for diversity, and rights (Killen & Smetana, 2009; Smetana, 2006; Turiel & Killen, 2010; Wainyby, 2006). These goods focus on individual rights and welfare, which are characteristic of liberal individualism.

SD theorists' unacknowledged commitment to liberal individualism is further demonstrated in their division of social knowledge into three domains: the personal, the conventional, and the moral (Smetana, 2006). The personal domain deals with behaviors involving individual prerogative and choice, an individualist commitment. The distinguishing feature of the moral domain is the way an act affects another's welfare (Nucci, 2001). Acts not dealing with another's welfare, although socially or personally relevant, are placed outside of the realm of morality. Thus, welfare and justice are enshrined as the pinnacle of moral action, another liberal individualist commitment.

SDT's implicit endorsement of liberal individualism without an explicit acknowledgment of this value commitment is troubling. Further, SD theorists do not connect this implicit value commitment to a theory of the good, perhaps assuming that liberal individualism itself is a theory of the good. This renders SDT's theory of the good ambiguous and tenuous. There is good reason, however, to believe that liberal individualism fails as a theory of the good. Decades of critiques of liberal individualism have gone without a convincing response. In order to answer these contentions, SD theorists must explicitly own their value commitment and provide a convincing defense.

Moral Foundations Theory

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) endorses consequentialist principles, virtue ethics, and a Humean theory of the good, creating a confusing amalgamation of theories of the good. Greene (2007) argues that consequentialist principles provide the “best available standard for public decision making” (p. 77). Haidt and Graham (2009) further support this view: “Our normative position is a kind of consequentialism—we think moral systems should be judged by the quality of the worlds they lead to” (p. 396). In other publications, however, Haidt advocates for virtue theories as the “most psychologically sound approach to morality” (Haidt & Joseph, 2004, p. 62; see also Haidt & Joseph, 2007). In yet a different paper, Greene (2007a) argues with Hume that “all moral judgment must have some affective component” (p. 64). These disjointed quotes come from papers within a 4-year span, indicating that they do not indicate a progression of thought within the theory. Rather, they point to an overzealous acceptance of whichever theory of the good seems to be most consistent with the topic du jour.

Implicitly, MFT also endorses all three theories of the good. MF theorists posit the existence of five foundations of morality: care/ harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betraying, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation (Graham et al., 2013). Individuals and cultures are thought to emphasize varying combinations of these five domains. MF theorists implicitly embrace consequentialist principles in their views of the nature of morality. In MFT, morality is an evolutionary good that “binds together cooperative groups and suppresses selfishness within them” (Haidt, 2008, p. 65). Thus, the morality of an act can be judged by the degree to which it binds together groups or suppresses selfishness. Each of the five foundations can link back to these two principles: harm/care suppresses selfishness, in-group/loyalty encourages social cohesion, etc. This is consequentialist in principle as it focuses on the outcomes of an act to

determine its morality. MFT embraces Humean sentimentalism through its endorsement of the Social Intuitionist Model (Haidt, 2001), which holds that moral behavior is the results of automatic emotional processes and that moral reasoning is most frequently a post-hoc rationalization. These assumptions place primacy on moral emotions, a markedly Humean view.

The whole-hearted endorsement of three disparate theories of the good is deeply problematic. Although it is possible that the three theories could be harmonized, no philosopher at present has successfully done so. In their own writing, MF theorists fail to acknowledge, let alone attempt to harmonize, their conflicting views of the good life. This leaves their overall theory quite obscure. Does the good life entail living according to virtue, or is it marked by sole concern about the consequence of an action? What action should be engaged in if an individual's moral intuition and an objective consideration of the consequences are at odds? MFT must seriously consider its premises to answer these questions.

Moral Identity Theory

Unlike SDT and MFT, Moral Identity Theory (MIT) endorses and is consistent with one theory of the good: Aristotle's eudaimonic theory. Within Aristotle's theory, MI theorists endorse a range of "virtues" or values, but they do not tie these values back to the overall good of eudaimonia or flourishing. Thus despite their admirable consistency, MI theorists fall short of tying their framework to a comprehensive theory of the good. I review the way three groups of MI theorists endorse virtues in what they consider a theory of eudaimonia.

Narvaez' Triune Ethics Theory (2008) explicitly endorses eudaimonic theory and comes nearest to providing a conceptualization of the good life. Narvaez discusses three primary ethics or goods: the ethic of security, which focuses on physical survival and thriving in context, the ethic of engagement, which drives toward intimacy, and the ethic of imagination, which involves

stepping away from emotion to coordinate the intuitions of the security and engagement ethics. Narvaez and others discuss the importance of other goods within these three ethics including physical contact, sociality, love, emotion regulation, self-development, flexible adaptation, moral expertise, moral responsibility, and ethical sensitivity (Narvaez 2009, 2010, 2012). Although Narvaez discusses the way these goods interact, she does not meaningfully discuss the nature of the good life outside of offering three main components.

Other MI theorists define the good life based on the life lived by moral exemplars. Colby and Damon (1993) offer the following criteria of a moral exemplar: a sustained commitment to moral ideals, consistency of moral action, willingness to risk self-interest for moral values, tendency to inspire others, and humility (see also Matsuba and Walker, 2005). This list seems to provide a basic description of what might be seen as a virtuous life but does not explain precisely what constitutes a virtuous life.

Researchers studying moral identity or personality also tend to embrace eudaimonic theory but fail to explain how their primary good of moral identity fits within the broader framework. They define the good life as being marked by a “whole-hearted commitment to the moral good” (Blasi, 2005, p. 82). A cohesive moral identity is a developmental good that one may attain by “construct[ing] a unified identity around a core of deeply rooted moral concerns” (Hardy & Carlo, 2005, p. 248). The good of moral identity is one of continuity, coherence, and commitment (Colby & Damon, 1993; Hart, 2005). However, no indication is given of how moral identity relates to the good life as a whole.

MI theorists often refer to an overarching eudaimonic theory and spell out a number of virtues, making a clear value commitment. Despite this admirable acknowledgment of values, MI theorists do not explore how the individual virtues they hold contribute to the good life. They

seem to assume that the term eudaimonia is synonymous with virtue. Some seem to believe that single goods (i.e. moral identity) are more important to flourishing while others hold a distinctive system of goods as important. MIT would be benefited by a shift in focus from individual virtues to the nature of the good life. A serious understanding the good life would move away from the present hodgepodge of virtues approach by providing a more cohesive framework to explain how the individual virtues relate to each other.

Conclusion

SDT, MFT, and MIT all attempt to define the nature of the good life. They vary in their explicit adherence to theories of the good as well as in their consistency with their stated theory of the good. SDT fails to acknowledge an implicit theory of the good that drives much of their theorizing. MFT acknowledges three theories of the good but does not indicate how these theories interact. MIT endorses Aristotle's eudaimonic theory but does not describe the relationship of individual virtues to the good life or give a detailed picture of the good life. All three theories lack clarity in their discussion of the good life. This is deeply problematic because the *telos* of morality is left unclear or unexplained. Thus, it would be impossible to judge if any of these theories of morality "succeeded" as we have no idea of what success should look like! A more serious consideration of the good life would help each of the theoretical perspectives develop its own measurement of morality.

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