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# **Cubist Consequentialism: The Pros and Cons of an Agent-Patient Template for Morality**

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Gray, Young, and Waytz (2012) make a compelling case for why mind perception is a vital component of moral judgment. The agent-patient dyad is a useful tool that helps identify and organize the psychological processes that often operate when people confront moral stimuli. One strength of the idea is that it is thoroughly psychological; it provides an overarching framework geared toward describing the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that comprise individuals' experiences with morality, and therefore it connects research on morality with mainstream theories about basic processes. It also offers a precise and parsimonious account of the conditions necessary to initiate moral evaluation. That said, the implicit consequentialism in the agent-patient dyad may not account well for moral motivation and the way people perceive their own moral actions. Additionally, the exclusive focus on harm may limit the capacity of the approach to explain the origins of moral disagreement, or differences in how people think about harm in different contexts. In sum, the agent-patient dyad is one possible psychological template for morality, but morality may be too diverse to distill down to a single essence. In our commentary, we begin with a discussion of what we see as the major contributions of the mind perception approach and then shift to a discussion of aspects of morality that the agent-patient dyad seems less able to explain.

## **Connecting Morality to the Rest of Psychology**

The mind perception approach highlights that morality is fundamentally relational and therefore should involve processes common to other social perceptions. This view is consistent with functionalist perspectives that view morality as a system that facilitates interpersonal interaction (e.g., Darwin, 1872/1981; Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Krebs, 2008; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Rawls, 1971/1999), and it opens the door to draw from large pools of knowledge from other areas of psychology and across disciplines. Although we and others have argued that people subjectively experience morality as a unique domain (e.g., Bauman & Skitka, 2009; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; see also Turiel, 1983; Wojciszke, 1994), there is no reason to believe that the psychological mechanisms that underlie our moral sensibilities are unique or distinct from those that operate in amoral contexts. Therefore, a useful contribution of the mind perception approach, and the agent-patient dyad in particular, is that it helps link morality with other social psychological theories of basic processes.

## **Moral Agency**

As Gray et al. (2012) suggest, over 50 years of research on attribution processes can guide our understanding of how and why people make causal attributions for behavior (e.g., Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1966; Malle, 2006). When

coupled with well-established theories of responsibility that emphasize the role of personal causality in the way people assign of blame (e.g., Alicke, 2000; Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995), it becomes clear that a wealth of knowledge relevant to morality already exists. Several scholars have already begun to make connections between morality and these broader theories (e.g., Cushman, 2008; Guglielmo & Malle, 2010; Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011), and the mind perception approach helps draw attention to these efforts and create a common narrative. That said, one could question the extent to which the addition of moral agency to models of intentionality, blame, and responsibility helps to clarify which of these more detailed models best captures the way people judge actors. In other words, moral agency is a useful label that subsumes an array of theories and emphasizes the role of attribution processes in moral judgment, but it is less clear whether it is a necessary construct that makes a unique contribution to our understanding of morality beyond these other well-established theories and constructs.

### **Moral Patience**

By articulating a role for moral patience, the mind perception approach addresses a limitation of work that has focused solely on actors. Specifically, it answers questions about how perceivers differentiate moral and amoral situations by asserting that morality is at stake when perceivers believe that the target of an agent's action has a mind and will benefit or suffer from others' actions. For example, morality is relevant when an individual kicks another person but not when a person kicks a rock. Unlike actor-only models, moral patience provides a way to account for variability in when people make moral (versus amoral) judgments; the extent to which people perceive targets to have a conscious mind is positively associated with the conferral of moral rights and relevance. One implication of this proposition is that perceivers can extend moral rights beyond humanity (e.g., animal

rights; Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012; see also Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997) or deny moral rights to certain individuals or groups by either perceiving the existence or non-existence of a mind (cf. Bandura, 1999).

Although not discussed in the paper, the notion of moral patience has a lot in common with research on "the scope of justice" (e.g., Deutsch, 1974, 1985; Opatow, 1990, 2001; Staub, 1989). Moral exclusion theory, for example, draws from social identity theory and research on perceptual biases to explain when and to whom justice and other moral rules apply (Opatow, 1990, 2001). It suggests that people feel a weaker sense of moral obligation to those who are less similar to themselves (i.e., outgroup members) and those who seem to be more responsible for their plight (cf. Lerner & Simmons, 1966; Messick & Sentis, 1983). In other words, moral exclusion theory articulates in detail some of the processes that seem likely to underlie moral patience. Future work will need to address whether and how mind perception extends ideas about moral exclusion. Currently, it is unclear whether mind perception is a cause, consequence, or additional criterion that affects inclusion or exclusion from moral communities.

### **Connecting Mind Perception to the Rest of Morality**

Although the mind perception approach has its strengths, it may be too narrow to account for the whole of morality. In the remaining sections, we describe aspects of morality that do not seem to fit within the agent-patient template: (a) situations that involve moral behavior not motivated by consequences, and (b) moral judgments at levels of analysis other than the individual. We conclude with a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the re-introduction of harm as the cornerstone of moral theory, and explore how an explanation based solely on harm might complement theories that posit a more varied taxonomy of moral concerns.

## Implicit Consequentialism

Gray et al. (2012) suggest that “the essence of morality is captured by the combination of harmful intent and painful experience” (p. 14). Conceptualizing morality in this way implicitly asserts that people are innate consequentialists. Although consequences, especially negative consequences, often are central to moral evaluations, people also strive to attain virtue and adhere to moral rules for reasons that are largely unrelated to how their behavior impacts others. Support for this idea can be traced at least as far back as the Aristotelian notion of eudaimonia, or self-flourishing, which includes the pursuit of virtue as a goal in an of itself (Aristotle, 350BCE/1908). Modern perspectives on character and virtue ethics also emphasize that people find meaning and value in pursuing ideals, independent of the effects that doing so has on others (e.g., Anscombe, 1958; Colby & Damon, 1992, Noam, 1993). Additionally, more deontological theories of moral development assert that as young children internalize moral rules, they begin to treat them as ends, not means (Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1997). Although some have argued that moral rules really are just heuristics that help people achieve good consequences (see Gigerenzer, 2008; Hare, 1993, Sunstein, 2005), these views seem to conflict with the way people experience their moral beliefs and values. If consequentialism is part and parcel of the one true essence of morality, are normative approaches that focus on moral rules and virtues just epiphenomena of consequential morality? The agent-patient dyad places such heavy emphasis on consequences that it suggests that they are. In short, the agent-patient dyad marginalizes moral motivations that can stem from a desire to be good or do right for its own sake, which seems to us to be problematic and therefore incomplete as an account for the rule of morality in people’s everyday experiences.

There is empirical support for the notion that people’s moral concerns are not always motivated by consequences. For example people sometimes

take action because they feel morally obligated to do so, even if they do not expect their actions to make a difference. When people have strong moral convictions about a given issue or case, they are more motivated to become politically engaged (e.g., vote, engage in activism, Skitka & Bauman, 2008; Wisneski & Skitka, 2011). Research that has attempted to explain the connections between moral conviction and willingness to take action found that beliefs about the likely efficacy of taking action did not account for this effect; instead, variables such as perceived obligation to take a stand and anticipated pride (but not regret) mediated the effects of moral conviction on engagement (Morgan, 2011). In short, doing the right thing was more of a motivational concern than confidence that doing so would bring about the desired consequences.

## Levels of Analysis and Value Conflict

People also care about social justice and see various issues of the day such as civil rights, the appropriateness of the Iraq War, same sex marriage, physician assisted suicide, etc. as being deeply tied to their conceptions of morality (Janoff-Bulman, 2011; Skitka, 2010). Describing moral issues like these in the terms of the dyadic model of morality requires attributing mind to a nation and the body politic. Although Gray et al. (2012) cite some evidence that people attribute minds to groups, this aspect of the theory seems a bit of a stretch. Consistent with the idea that it may be difficult to extend the agent-patient model beyond judgments about individual acts, considerable evidence indicates that people apply very different moral criteria to problems involving individuals than they do to larger coordination problems involving the collective good (e.g., Brickman, Folger, Goode, & Schule, 1981; Son Hing, Bobocel, & Zanna, 2002; Zdaniuk & Bobocel, 2011).

For example, people make judgments of fairness differently depending on whether they are considering outcomes for individuals (i.e.

microjustice) or the collective (i.e., macrojustice, Brickman et al., 1981). People may see distributing pay to individuals on the basis of equity and merit as morally appropriate when making these judgments on a case-by-case basis. That said, people may object to the subsequent distribution that results from the aggregate of these individual decisions; for example, if the resulting income inequality across salient group boundaries is unacceptably high. Conversely, attempts to address concerns about income equality at the aggregate level can be seen as immoral from the perspective of the individual who worked hard to earn his or her income. Consistent with the argument that levels of analysis affects moral judgments, people who take a macro level perspective tend to morally support affirmative action policies designed to achieve greater group equality, whereas those who take a micro perspective tend to oppose it (Son Hing et al., 2002; Zdaniuk & Bobocel, 2011). Taken together, a complete theory of morality will need to account for how people think about not only individual actions, but other concerns as well, including macro level instances of moral politics.

### **Harm as Moral Currency**

Finally, regardless of whether the agent-patient dyad is the ideal template for all of moral psychology, we think the emphasis it places on harm may be an important step toward rebalancing the field; the rapid embrace of intuitions as the basis for moral judgment opened the door to a variety of elicitors of moral judgment but left underspecified how the brain integrates them with each other and other processes known to be involved in moral judgment. Harm, like money, is useful because it can provide a single metric to quantify and aggregate value based on any number of different features a situation may include. In some sense, this view parallels the notion of subjective utility (Bentham, 1781/1948), in that all value can be measured along a single dimension. In the case of

moral psychology, harm may serve as a common currency with which people can weigh any number of relevant moral concerns; it may represent the basic process of how people compare, for example, group-based inequality and individual merit. Gray et al. (2012) do an outstanding job of articulating how parsimoniously and elegantly this idea can be applied. They describe how harm may underlie and unify a wide variety of violations that other theories treat separately and classify as being qualitatively distinct (e.g., Haidt, 2007; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). Clearly, this strategy maximizes parsimony, and it seems especially reasonable when viewing morality through the lens of information processing or social neuroscience traditions.

Despite the allure of this simplicity, it is important to remember that many other theories of morality created taxonomies of moral concerns to provide a greater degree of specificity and increase overall explanatory power. To a large extent, Shweder et al.'s (1997) “Big Three” and Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004) were responses to the hegemony of harm in theories of moral development. Of course, Kohlberg, Turiel, and others often framed their ideas in terms of justice, but harm was a theoretical cornerstone of these theoretical perspectives (see Nucci & Narvaez, 2008). Shweder, Haidt, and others believed that these approaches missed important aspects of morality because they reflected a bias toward autonomy often found in Western, secular thought (i.e., WEIRD cultures — Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). In short, theories that proposed multiple bases of morality gained traction because including multiple constructs that describe the various ways people find moral meaning in situations, especially across cultures, was both useful and generative.

The additional constructs proposed by taxonomic theories of morality (e.g., fairness, ingroup loyalty, purity) exist at a higher level of

abstraction than does harm in the mind perception approach. Further progress on understanding morality may be achieved by attempting to integrate theories across levels of abstraction. In other words, it may be more productive to consider ways in which the mind perception approach and other process theories of moral judgment (e.g., Cushman, 2008; Greene, 2007; Guglielmo & Malle, 2010) complement more taxonomic theories of morality (e.g., Haidt & Graham, 2007; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Shweder et al., 1997) rather than argue over which view is correct. For example, the mind perception approach accounts well for the psychological processes that are proximate to moral judgment of individual acts. Although it offers only a vague definition of what might trigger perceived harm, the mind perception approach is precise about the role of harm vis-à-vis other psychological processes, such as attributions of intentionality. In contrast, Moral Foundations Theory offers a useful taxonomy of potential elicitors of moral intuitions, but it provides little specificity about how the brain processes, integrates, refines, and uses this information to make moral judgments. Putting these two theories together, it could be that moral intuitions ultimately are inputs that could be labeled “harm” by process-oriented theories. Most of the apparent conflict across perspectives may therefore be rooted in meta-theoretical aesthetics, rather than more substantive disagreement.

One major challenge to integrating theories that stem from different traditions and include different language and assumptions is finding the balance between extreme parsimony and complexity. At the empirical level, research should seek to test whether harm comes in different “flavors,” for example, whether perceived harm derived from fairness concerns is qualitatively different than perceived harm derived from physical violence. At the theoretical level, psychological criteria must be established for what constitutes a distinct basis or foundation of morality. That is, taxonomies of moral concerns do not provide clear criteria for deciding

whether and why any given taxon qualifies as a core moral concern, nor how these taxa relate to other psychological processes known to be involved in moral judgment. In sum, all perspectives have their benefits and liabilities. Future work should be open to integrating various theoretical perspectives to advance our understanding of how people make moral judgments and the role of morality more broadly in human affairs.

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