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INTRODUCTION

What Is Moral Motivation, and Why Does It Matter?

MARTHA K. BERG AND EDWARD C. CHANG

*“Why did you do all this for me?” he asked.
“I don’t deserve it. I’ve never done anything for you.”*

—E.B. White, *Charlotte’s Web* (1952)

What drives us to do good things, or to avoid doing bad? This question has long sparked inquiry across multiple disciplines, and scholars have debated the answer to it both within and across fields. Yet morality as a topic of study has seen a resurgence in the past few decades, bringing this question back to the forefront of academic thought.

WHAT IS MORALITY?

To discuss moral motivation, we first must land on a working definition of morality. Although even this definition has elicited contention among moral scholars (Gert & Gert, 2020), for our purposes, we can conceptualize morality as a framework that seeks to guide questions of right and wrong.

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Immoral behavior, then, is that which is considered “wrong” (and moral behavior the opposite). To any given individual, moral rules are typically considered to be prescriptive, important, and generalizable across a range of similar situations (Wong, 2013). However, the extent to which there is a universal set of behaviors that are right and wrong (a *universalist* perspective) or many individualized or socially constructed ones (a *relativist* perspective) is itself disputed (Shweder & Bourne, 1984), and we return to this question throughout this volume. How can we study morally relevant behavior, though, if the bounds of this construct are potentially blurred? As we will see in the chapters of this volume, one approach is to consider morality from a *descriptive* perspective rather than a *normative* one; that is, rather than testing people’s behaviors against a set of universal rules that are presumed to be the correct ones, we can construct and investigate moral frameworks based on the rules that people actually follow (which, of course, naturally lends itself to a relativist perspective, or at least one that allows for the possibility of relativism). In practice, then, *in studying morality, we study what people consider to be right and wrong, and how these rules guide behavior.*

WHY BE MORAL?

Once we have determined that a certain behavior is “moral,” how can we understand *why* people engage in that behavior? Is it just because of its designation as moral (i.e., based on a motivation to act morally)? What about when there are other competing motivations at play, some of which may drive conflicting behaviors? What about when there are other competing behaviors to choose from, some of which also might be classified as moral, such as when one must decide between helping a stranger and helping a friend?

Broadly put, the question of motivation centers on the factors that lead people to initiate and persist in certain actions, moral or otherwise. In other words, out of all possible behaviors that a person could choose to do in a given scenario, why do they choose one specific behavior? Models of motivation have suggested that behavior ultimately is driven by unmet needs, whether these are survival needs (e.g., hunger, thirst) or psychological ones (e.g., belonging, consistency), whether they are distal (i.e., long term) or more proximal (i.e., immediate; Karniol & Ross, 1996; Locke, 1991; Pittman & Heller, 1987). Yet there are many ways of satisfying needs once they have been identified; for example, people can choose to eat a wide variety of foods to slake their hunger. To select a specific behavior among these options, people leverage their *values*, which have been proposed as the essence of motivation

(Locke, 1991). Returning to the previous example, one can imagine different food choices resulting from the value one places on, for example, sensory pleasure, dietary purity, or even animal rights. As such, values drive motivation toward specific goals to satisfy needs, but so too do other factors, such as perceptions of self-efficacy for meeting needs through a certain method, social expectations and comparisons (which also serve to inform values), and perceptions of the costs versus benefits of a certain course of action (Hattie et al., 2020). Furthermore, once an action is completed, outcomes (i.e., rewards or punishments for the behavior and the associated emotional responses) create a feedback loop; positive outcomes can motivate a continuation or repetition of the behavior, and negative outcomes can motivate a different behavioral solution the next time the same need arises (Locke, 1991; Pittman & Heller, 1987).

Thus, the range of motivations that might drive any given behavior is wide, and moral behaviors are no exception. Indeed, given the social relevance of moral and immoral behavior (both in terms of its distal relevance to social cooperation and its proximal relevance to everyday relationship dynamics), understanding *moral* motivations can be particularly tricky. When a person engages in a positive moral action, such as providing help to someone else, is it driven by a need to help the other person—for example, to fulfill a sense of debt or duty to others—or because this action benefits the self in some way, for example, by eliciting positive emotions in the self or affirming an identity to which morality is central? What are the central unmet needs that drive this helping behavior? These questions have been widely debated across multiple disciplines, and next we discuss some (but certainly not all) possible motivations for moral behavior.

To begin, we return to the opening quote, in which the speaker (Wilbur) implies that others help us because we have previously helped them. According to Kohlberg (1981), this idea of *reciprocal altruism* represents one of the early stages of moral development, in which people use reciprocal fairness norms to dictate their moral behavior. This motivation for moral behavior extends beyond early moral development; numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of reciprocity to social cooperation (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981; Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003; Gintis, 2000), and it is theorized to be one of the universal components that give rise to morality (Curry et al., 2019; Gouldner, 1960; Henrich & Muthukrishna, 2021).

As reflected in the opening epigraph, however, there are times when reciprocity cannot explain moral behavior, which implies that there are other possible motives for moral behavior. The addressee of this quote (Charlotte) responds by indicating that she helped because Wilbur is a friend. In other

words, Charlotte's moral behavior toward Wilbur is motivated not by his past moral behavior toward her but by the communal relationship they share (Clark & Mills, 1979). But what are the motivations within close relationships that drive moral behavior? Jacqueline (2001) contended that in an Aristotelian view, the nature of close relationships both requires and reinforces virtuous behavior. In particular, virtue is a necessary precursor for friendship of the highest degree, meaning the kind of friendship in which each individual acts in the interest of the other's welfare rather than for self-interested or instrumental reasons. Moral behavior is required to attract similarly virtuous friends, and therefore the reward intrinsic to this type of friendship spurs us to act morally.

Scholars have also linked relationships to moral behavior through *empathy*, or the sharing of another person's mental state, which happens most frequently when the other person is relationally close or similar to the self (Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2012; Han, 2018). This aligns with one leading framework of morality that emphasizes the *ethic of care*, in which empathy is a critical component (Gilligan et al., 1988). Similar to moral emotions, empathy is thought to motivate helping and other moral behavior, acting as a spark to drive people to action (Coke et al., 1978; Hoffman, 1990). However, this empathy-altruism hypothesis sparked a decades-long debate that centered on the question of motivation. As noted, the original theorizing was that seeing another in distress led to other-oriented (i.e., empathic) concern, which in turn motivated altruistic behavior. However, others argued that because seeing another in distress sparked distress in the self, the helping behavior was instead motivated by self-oriented (i.e., egoistic) concerns, namely, the desire to alleviate one's own negative reaction (Cialdini et al., 1987).

More broadly, many have turned to moral emotions to explain how moral behavior is motivated. Perhaps most notably, Hume (2009) argued that, in line with his assertion that reason is the slave of the passions, moral reasoning is fundamentally shaped by emotions. Indeed, empirical work has demonstrated a robust link between emotions and moral behavior (Eisenberg, 2000; Haidt, 2001; Prinz & Nichols, 2010; Tangney et al., 2007). For example, experimentally inducing disgust (Schnall et al., 2008) or anger (Seidel & Prinz, 2013) increases the severity of individuals' moral judgments, whereas inducing happiness does the opposite (Seidel & Prinz, 2013).

Moral behavior may also be motivated by a sense of duty. Although some have argued that this comes in the form of a duty to adhere to the law (e.g., Kant, 1785), others have focused on one's duty to a higher power (e.g., James, 1982). These ideas are echoed in Kohlberg's (1981) stages of moral development, in which Stage 1 describes following rules in order to avoid punishment,

but adherence to—and, eventually, critical reasoning about—societal principles are central throughout later stages of development. Morality motivated by religious beliefs has been posited as one of three universal ethics (Shweder et al., 2013), and it is further supported by public opinion; although there is national and regional variation, nearly half of people worldwide believe that religious beliefs are necessary for being moral (Tamir et al., 2020).

Finally, moral identity has been studied as a motivation for moral behavior. This idea has been most notably elaborated in Blasi's (1983) *self model* of moral functioning, which posits that when an individual judges a moral action to be central to their sense of self, they are motivated by self-consistency, or the desire to engage in behavior that is consistent with that sense of self. Moral identity may help to turn obligations (i.e., moral rules) into desires (Batson, 2011); whereas all individuals gain moral knowledge over the course of development, some argue that only those who internalize and endow that knowledge with personal relevance will be motivated to act morally (Nunner-Winkler, 1993). These ideas have been borne out in empirical evidence; the extent to which morality is central to one's identity predicts moral behavior across a range of domains (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy & Carlo, 2011).

WHY DOES MOTIVATION MATTER?

The range of possible motivations for individuals' moral behavior sets the stage for the rest of this volume, in which we explore these motivations—including how they are shaped, how they are balanced against other motivations, and how we can assess them. But before we do so, we must ask: Why is this task important? Why should we care about the motivations that drive people's moral or immoral behavior?

To illustrate, we start with a classic thought experiment, introduced in Plato's (2007) *Republic*. The Ring of Gyges makes the wearer invisible and thus allows them to commit moral transgressions without detection. Why would the wearer *not* commit moral transgressions?

In the original text, Socrates answers by stating that, even if not detected, committing moral transgressions harms the soul and jeopardizes one's chance at an afterlife, an answer that echoes elements of both identity-based and religion-based motivation. In doing so, though, he draws a contrast between two courses of action that are differentiated by the underlying motives that drive them. In other words, in order to predict whether any given wearer would use the ring to do wrong, we would need to understand their underlying motivations. Are they motivated by the reward of appearing moral,

or are they motivated by a desire to protect the sanctity of their character, regardless of who sees them?

On a more quotidian level, this thought experiment can generalize to any situation that affords the individual some sense of invisibility, whether that is due to a systemic lack of oversight or a coincidental window of opportunity to act unseen. Prior work has shown that when such an opportunity presents itself, people often choose actions metaphorically similar to wearing the Ring of Gyges: They act immorally, even though they know that what they are doing is wrong, because they think their transgression will go undetected (e.g., Batson, 2011; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007). Batson (2011) attributed this moral hypocrisy to “a relative lack of truly moral motivation” (p. 230), highlighting the centrality of motivation to understanding and predicting people’s moral actions.

Understanding motivation is also critical from a moral education perspective. Wilson (1972) argued that encouraging moral behavior without interrogating the underlying motivations is akin to teaching children the answers to math problems without teaching them how to arrive at those answers. Learning how to navigate the reasons for moral action, including the various motivations we outlined in the previous sections, is important in the development of one’s own moral framework. Furthermore, one could argue, as Wilson did, that these motivations do not carry equal moral value; if one wants to encourage acting on a certain moral motivation over others, for example, then understanding the range of what drives people is essential.

One compelling case for valuing certain motivations for morality over others, from a moral education standpoint, is that, in general, people tend to perceive behaviors differently based on the presumed underlying motivation. For example, in the previous section we discussed a religious motivation for moral behavior. Recent work has shown that when people perceive someone’s moral behavior to be religiously motivated, they perceive that behavior as less moral (Gervais, 2014). Similarly, when helping behavior is done for self-oriented reasons, people rate the act as less altruistic (Carlson & Zaki, 2018). Thus, motivation for moral behavior is important because others think it is so; how our actions are received is dependent on our intentions (or, at least, what others believe them to be).

Finally, motivation has become an increasingly central component of how we model moral thought and action. For example, the social intuitionist model proposes that moral judgments are based on quick, intuitive, and emotion-driven evaluations that influence later deliberate reasoning (Greene et al., 2001; Haidt, 2001). This model is aligned with the broader concept of *motivated reasoning*; we reach certain conclusions not because we deliberately reason our way there but because we are motivated to reach certain conclusions,

and we selectively apply rules and beliefs that help us to justify them (Ditto et al., 2009; Kunda, 1990). From this perspective, motivation is inherently linked to morality, and we as a multidisciplinary scientific community should prioritize investigating motivation as a critical step to expanding our understanding of human morality.

OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT VOLUME

The goal of this volume is to cut across disciplines and modes of inquiry to answer central questions about moral motivation. The chapters explore how moral motivation is shaped socially, for example, through learning the expectancies of our social and cultural groups. They investigate how moral motivation differs from and is balanced against other motivations that drive behavior, and they describe how we measure these motivations as well as the challenges we face in measuring them. The volume is divided into three parts, each roughly corresponding to an overarching lens for human behavior—social, psychological, and neurobiological, respectively—but each enriched by the inclusion of leading scholars across multiple disciplines.

Part I, *Social Contexts and Their Motivational Consequences*, tackles the question of moral motivation from a social perspective, examining how communities, groups, and relationships motivate our moral frameworks and tendencies. In Chapter 1, Hitlin describes how sociology, a discipline concerned with collective human behavior, can shed light on what motivates morality at an individual level. He introduces key sociological constructs that speak to individuals' motives, which he argues can contribute toward a more transdisciplinary understanding of morality. In Chapter 2, Malle describes how context motivates moral behavior by way of social norms. He explains the ways in which norm violations are socially regulated, which results in patterns of moral behavior that allow a social group to flourish. In Chapter 3, Miller and Engelbrecht examine cultural variation in the social norms that motivate moral behavior. They describe and integrate two major approaches to studying morality across cultures—universalism and relativism—to draw conclusions about how culture shapes our moral motives.

Part II, *Psychological Frameworks and Individual Differences*, examines how individuals differ in their moral actions and the psychological factors that motivate them. In Chapter 4, Gawronski, Luke, and Körner explore three bases upon which individuals may make moral decisions: consequences, norms, and generalized inaction. They introduce the CNI model, which empirically differentiates among these motives, and they review what this model has revealed about the variation in motives across individuals. In Chapter 5,

Snow describes how the philosophical tradition of virtue ethics views moral, or virtuous, motivation as a necessary precursor to moral action. She builds on this philosophical stance by introducing whole trait theory, an empirically grounded model in which traits, including virtue, are assessed via the distribution of trait-appropriate responses in daily life. In Chapter 6, FeldmanHall and Lamba turn to the competing motivations we encounter, exploring how people learn to resolve these conflicts; specifically, they describe the mechanisms for social learning, including reinforcement learning and Bayesian models, that allow us to learn the social dynamics and reward contingencies that drive moral behavior.

Part III, Biological Origins and Markers of Moral Motivation, examines the ways in which the brain shapes, and can reveal insights about, our motivations for moral behavior. In Chapter 7, Tarsha and Narvaez describe the development of neurobiological systems that underpin moral motivation. They explain how the early satisfaction or nonsatisfaction of basic needs shapes our later well-being, including the moral mindsets that direct our behavior. In Chapter 8, Theriault introduces a novel account that posits that morality is motivated by a biological drive to optimize metabolic costs; specifically, he argues that we minimize the costs of information processing by behaving in line with others' expectations (e.g., by following moral norms), which in turn influences others to behave in similarly predictable (i.e., normative) ways.

Finally, we conclude with a broad synthesis of the social, psychological, and neurobiological approaches. In the Conclusion, Laurin and Thomas explore the nexus of these perspectives, drawing insights about the nature of moral motivation as well as important directions for future scholarship.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As a whole, this volume seeks to offer an integrative examination of the role of motivation in shaping morality. In bringing together leading researchers across sociology, philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience, we strive to represent the complex motivational aspects of morality, which represents a crucial step toward understanding how and why our moral choices arise and in turn can shape and guide how we engage in moral praxis.

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