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Moral Judgments

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Synonyms

Blame judgments; Dual-processes of moral judgment; Moral categorization; Moral decision-making; Moral evaluation; Moral intuitions; Morality

Definition

There is little consensus in the literature on a single definition of moral judgment (see Malle 2020). Here we define moral judgment as categorizing a target (event, behavior, people, etc.) as morally right or morally wrong (or not morally relevant). This may include evaluations, norm judgments, wrongness judgments, and blame judgments.

The Lion King (Allers and Minkoff 1994) has become known for one of the most poignant death scenes in modern cinema (Allford 2015). Mufasa clings to the side of the rock face as a stampede passes through the gorge below. He asks for help from his brother Scar who is standing atop the gorge. Scar reaches down, digs his claws into Mufasa's paws, and exclaims "Long live the king" before throwing Mufasa down to his death. In a similar, now classic, scene from the film *Die Hard* (McTiernan 1988), villain Hans Gruber crashes through a window on the thirtieth floor of the Nakatomi Tower. All that prevents him from falling to his death is his grip on the wristwatch of Holly Gennero, wife of the protagonist, John McClane. In the moments that follow McClane opens the clasp on Holly's watch, successfully preventing her from being pulled out of the window while Gruber falls to his death.

In both cases above, a character falls to their death while another facilitates their death. And yes, despite the apparent parallels between them, these two scenes are far from comparable. One depicts the tragic death of a beloved character, while the other depicts the triumphant prevailing of the film's hero over the villain. That is, Scar's actions are regarded as morally reprehensible, while the actions of John McClane are regarded as morally praiseworthy. Readers familiar with both films are unlikely to view this as a contradiction; McClane is clearly the film's hero and successfully vanquishes the villain, while Mufasa is killed in cold blood by his power-hungry villainous brother.

This contrast illustrates two important points relevant to the current chapter. First, it highlights the complex and variable nature of moral judgments – judgments of similar actions, even those with similar outcomes, vary considerably depending on the broader context in which the

S. Allison et al. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Heroism Studies*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17125-3_488-1

action occurred. Second, it demonstrates how the concepts heroism and morality are closely intertwined. Heroes generally commit morally good actions, while morally wrong actions are committed by villains. We discuss each of these in turn.

Understanding Moral Judgment

Attempts to understand how people think about the concepts of *right* and *wrong* long predate the origins of modern psychology. A rich and extensive tradition in philosophy that includes contributions from Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hume, and Nietzsche (see Miller 2021) has existed for millennia. Building on this foundation, recent decades have seen a surge in research on moral psychology leading to a diverse range of theories of both the psychology of moral judgment, and what psychologists mean when they talk about moral judgment (see Malle 2020; see also Gray and Graham 2018).

A key feature of the morality literature has been an apparent tension between *intuitionist* and *rationalist* perspectives (Haidt 2001; Hume 1748; Kant 1959/1785; Nussbaum and Kahan 1996). According to intuitionist accounts, moral judgments are grounded in emotional or intuitive responses, rather than slow deliberative reasoning (Greene 2008; Haidt 2001; Prinz 2005). In contrast, rationalist approaches attribute moral judgments to deliberative reasoning and the application of discernible moral principles (Fine 2006; Kennett and Fine 2009; Kohlberg 1969; Royzman et al. 2015). In recent years, theorists have grappled with these divergent approaches by integrating them. And there has been a subsequent marked growth in popularity of dual-process approaches (Brand 2016; Byrd and Conway 2019; Crockett 2013; Cushman 2013; Greene 2016; Gubbins and Byrne 2014), which sketch a more unified framework for moral judgment, alleviating much of the tension between intuitionist and rationalist theory.

A major insight of dual-process approaches was to understand different types of processing as giving rise to different kinds of moral judgments. Some dual-process approaches distinguish between characteristically deontological (principled or rule-based, e.g., "do not harm") and characteristically utilitarian (maximizing benefit/minimizing harm, e.g., "harming one person may be acceptable if it saves five") judgments as being grounded in intuitive (or more emotional) processes and deliberative (or "cognition") processes respectively (Greene 2008, 2016; Byrd and Conway 2019; Conway and Gawronski 2013). We note that the terms deontological and utilitarian are imperfect descriptors, hence we include the preceding term "characteristically" to qualify our use of these terms (in line with Greene 2016). Other theorists have made a distinction between judgments of *actions* versus judgments of *outcomes*, arguing that intuitive (or model-free) processes are invoked for the former while the latter are grounded in deliberative (or model-based) processes (Cushman 2013; Crockett 2013). These mappings are appealing, however there is a growing body of evidence that suggests these theories do not account for the full picture of moral judgment (see McHugh et al. 2022, 138–139 for a brief overview).

Other approaches have attempted to understand moral judgment by placing less emphasis on the cognitive processes in favor of a more detailed analysis of the *content*. For instance, it has been shown that the way people think about characteristically utilitarian judgments reflects a concern for two distinct utilitarian dimensions of impartial beneficence (maximizing wellbeing) and instrumental harm (permitting harm to achieve a greater good; see Everett and Kahane 2020). Others have shown that in addition to considerations of consequences and norms, our moral judgments are additionally influenced by general preferences for inaction/action (Gawronski et al. 2017). Still others have attempted to develop taxonomies of different moral concerns (such as harm, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity, e.g., Graham et al. 2013; for alternatives, see Rozin et al. 1999; Shweder et al. 1997), or developed models that explain all of morality as relating to a single factor such as harm (Schein and Gray 2018) or cooperation (Curry 2016).

The approaches discussed thus far provide descriptively rich accounts of how people make moral judgments about specific content or types of content (e.g., deontological/utilitarian principles, actions/outcomes, norms/consequences/actions, etc.). However, in focusing on *content* these approaches cannot adequately account for the dynamism and context sensitivity observed in people's moral judgments. This poses a challenge to attempts to understand the underlying cognitive mechanisms. To address this, some theorists have proposed approaches that do not rely on assumptions relating to the *content* of moral judgments (e.g., Bucciarelli et al. 2008; Railton 2017; McHugh et al. 2022). For example, according to Moral Judgment as Categorization (MJAC, McHugh et al. 2022; see also Stich 1993; Harman et al. 2010; Prinz 2005) our moral judgments are governed by the same cognitive processes that underlie categorization more generally. Such approaches allow for the moral judgment processes to be rooted in the same perceptual and cognitive processes that underlie other forms of judgment and decision making, offering richer understanding of how people learn and apply moral categorizations in everyday life.

On a process-focused view all categorizations (moral and non-moral) are dynamic, context-dependent, and always occur as part of ongoing goal-directed activity. Applied to the examples at the beginning, even though the actions and the outcomes in both scenes are similar, the different contexts lead to clear differences in the judgments of the actions of Scar and of McClane.

Morality and Heroism

The moral judgments we make about "good" and "bad" people in entertainment reflect those that we make in real life, including those agents we decide to call heroes. Research suggests that people are incredibly sensitive to the context in which agents act prosocially (e.g., Inesi et al. 2021), to the intentions and motives of prosocial agents (Heyman et al. 2014; Lin-Healy and Small 2013), and to the outcomes of their behavior (Carlson and Zaki 2018; though people are more sensitive to actions than they are to outcomes for prosocial behavior; Yudkin et al. 2019). And when someone does something that appears morally good, there are still barriers to being regarded as truly good; morally good others can be threatening to one's identity. Indeed, we often deride those who seem nicer than us by assuming that they must be somehow deficient (e.g., Bashir et al. 2013) or ultimately selfishly motivated (Critcher and Dunning 2011). People will even punish those who behave prosocially in an effort to make themselves look better (Pleasant and Barclay 2018). All in all, there are many reasons and motives that contribute to people being largely skeptical of morally good agents. This makes being seen as a hero – as exceptionally morally good – hard work in real-life contexts.

When we look to fiction, being a hero is less difficult. There are many examples of characters being successfully depicted as heroes, including McClane from the opening to this chapter. Most people enjoy seeing good things happen to these characters (see Raney 2004 for review), and people don't typically root for their failure. Their success is in part because the viewer is sufficiently psychologically distant from a fictional hero, and in part because writers are able to build many of these morally good characters without flaws (e.g., Captain America). That is, unlike in the real world, the motives of fictional heroes are both known and clear. But this still isn't enough to make a good guy interesting. Even when information about motives is known, philosopher Susan Wolf has argued that real-world heroes, or "moral saints", are at best boring (Wolf 1982). Imagine a movie about Superman where his doing good deed after good deed was the only thing that transpired. It's not likely that this movie would draw in the same level of interest as the typical superhero movie. Much like the actions and decisions made by everyday prosocial agents, this depiction of Superman would be missing an important element – a villain. Superman movies are interesting *because of* the villain. Villains act as foils and a source of conflict to be resolved in superhero movies (see also Pizarro and Baumeister 2013), making them a powerful tool for directing interest toward morally good agents.

And this is true outside of the superhero context as well: Mufasa is a clearly good agent, and his goodness is amplified and made salient when compared against Scar. The fictional context affords the crafting of characters who are both undoubtedly morally good and also exceptionally engaging.

Bad guys also benefit from their positioning relative to morally good agents in fiction, but making a bad guy engaging is an altogether easier task. Bad guys frequently capture our interest, both in fiction and in real life. Research has found that, under certain contexts, both morally ambiguous and morally bad agents pique curiosity, and that immoral characters are watched more on Netflix (Wylie and Gantman 2023). This attraction to the "bad guys" emerges even when we feel similar to them (Krause and Rucker 2020). One reason why we are attracted to bad agents – both antiheroes and villains – is because their actions are frequently descriptively atypical. That is, agents can be bad in ways that are surprising, novel, and infrequently encountered in everyday life. People have a rich understanding of what makes up the categories of both bad and good, and we are motivated to understand and maintain coherent categorizations – in the service of resolving inconsistencies and supporting our understanding of the moral world around us. In contrast to villains, heroes and morally good agents often behave in ways that are descriptively normal, and inasmuch as they seem normal, they elicit less curiosity.

Nonetheless, people still laud and desire to engage with superheroes and moral exemplars – persons who are exceptionally morally good (or "paradigmatically good" as in Zagzebski 2013). That is, while people are curious to learn and understand the minds of "bad guys", engagement with those agents is effortful and frequently requires moral disengagement (Krakowiak and Tsay 2011; Shafer and Raney 2012). Morally good agents and moral exemplars, on the other hand, don't require that we morally disengage (though some self-protective mechanisms like do-gooder derogation are still deployed; Minson and Monin 2012). Research also finds that morally good agents do pique curiosity when they seem sufficiently atypical (Wylie and Gantman 2023; van de Ven et al. 2019). And, in the real world, moral exemplars really are atypical agents. Their personalities (Walker 1999; Walker and Frimer 2007), actions (van de Ven et al. 2019), and identities (Matsuba and Walker 2005) all differ from your average person. Moral exemplars may even have different affordances for moral (vs. selfish) actions (see Archer 2015 for discussion on moral necessity). Overall, moral exemplars differ from average moral agents, and people recognize this. People see a moral exemplar as someone who is selfless, prosocial, empathic, and possessing a preponderance of positive moral traits (e.g., bravery; Kinsella et al. 2015a, b).

While people are often curious about ambiguous and bad moral agents, it is not exclusively moral valence that drives curiosity. Instead, descriptive norms also play a special role in driving interest in moral agents in everyday life. In particular, moral heroes pique curiosity when they behave in ways that are atypical – ways that allow us to peer into the mind of someone who differs from ourselves, much like we do when we engage with morally bad agents. The opportunity to learn something about a moral agent that differs from yourself may be an avenue for maintaining an understanding of the world around you, and where you fit in it.

Conclusion

People have well-formulated ideas about what it means for someone to be good or bad. But we are nonetheless motivated to make sure we are correct – to be on the right side of a potentially changing norm or context in which a morally relevant behavior occurs. This is sometimes easier to do in the fictional space, where we are given sufficient information from which to make judgments. Fictional spaces also allow us to explore moral quandaries to practice and gain additional evidence of the right decision in a low-stakes environment (see Wylie et al. 2022). That is, the fictional space allows people to gain exposure to bad agents, which tend to capture interest because

beliefs about them are volatile (Siegel et al. 2018) and they are less typical. As such, we are less likely to encounter them in everyday life. In everyday life it is the morally good agent who we frequently encounter (Hofmann et al. 2014), and so those agents fail to inspire in the same way that exceptional agents do. That is, people who behave in mostly good ways are typical category members (McHugh et al. 2022). Moral heroes, both in fiction and in real life, on the other hand, are atypical. As a result, they pique our curiosity, and they attract our admiration (van de Ven et al. 2019). Finally, as moral exemplars, heroes can serve as role models (Kinsella et al. 2015a). These heroic role models have the dual functions of helping us know right from wrong and reminding us that there is good in the world (see Kinsella et al. 2015a), which together have the power to inspire us to act in more moral ways in our own lives.

Cross-References

- ▶ Ethical Leadership
- ▶ Ethics
- ▶ Evil on Screen/Fiction
- ▶ Fandom of Heroes and Villains
- ▶ Good and Evil
- ▶ Integrated Moral Motivation
- ▶ Moral Beauty
- ▶ Moral Conviction
- ▶ Moral Development
- ▶ Moral Exemplars
- ▶ Moral Intuition
- ▶ Moral Reasoning

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