

Abstract: Moral agency has dual aspects manifested in both the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely and the proactive power to behave humanely. Moral agency is embedded in a broader socio-cognitive self-theory encompassing affective self-regulatory mechanisms rooted in personal standards linked to self-sanctions. Moral functioning is thus governed by self-reactive selfhood rather than by dispassionate abstract reasoning. The self-regulatory mechanisms governing moral conduct do not come into play unless they are activated and there are many psychosocial mechanisms by which moral self-sanctions are selectively disengaged from inhumane conduct. The moral disengagement may centre on the cognitive restructuring of inhumane conduct into a benign or worthy one by moral justification, sanitising language and exonerative social comparison; disavowal of personal agency in the harm one causes by diffusion or displacement of responsibility; disregarding or minimising the injurious effects of one's actions; and attribution of blame to, and dehumanisation of, those who are victimised. Social cognitive theory adopts an interactionist perspective to morality in which moral actions are the products of the reciprocal interplay of personal and social influences. Given the many mechanisms for disengaging moral control at both the individual and collective level, civilised life requires, in addition to humane personal standards, safeguards built into social systems that uphold compassionate behaviour and renounce cruelty.

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