

Moral Judgment as Application of Multidimensional Rules

In the social cognitive view, moral thinking is a process in which multidimensional rules or standards are used to judge conduct. Situations with moral implications contain many decisional ingredients that not only vary in importance but may be given lesser or greater weight depending upon the particular constellation of events in a given moral predicament. Among the many factors that enter into judging the reprehensibility of conduct are the characteristics of the wrongdoers, such as their age, sex, ethnic and social status; the nature of the transgression; the contexts in which the conduct is performed and the perceived situational and personal motivators for it; the immediate and long-range consequences of the action; whether it produces personal injury or property damage; whether it is directed at faceless agencies and corporations or at individuals; the characteristics of the victims and their perceived blameworthiness. In dealing with moral dilemmas people must extract, weigh, and integrate the morally relevant information in the situations confronting them.

Moral rules or standards of conduct are fashioned from varied social sources, including precepts, evaluative social reactions, and models of moral commitments. From such diverse experiences people learn which factors are morally relevant and how much weight to attach to them. Factors that are weighed heavily under some combinations of circumstances may be disregarded or considered of lesser import under a different set of conditions. With increasing experience and cognitive competence, moral judgments change from single-dimensional rules to multidimensional and configural rules of conduct.

Researchers who approach moral thinking as a process of information integration have studied the rules by which children weigh and combine information in making moral judgments (Lane & Anderson, 1976;

Leon, 1980). When presented with situations varying in degree of maliciousness and harm, children do not reason dichotomously, that is, using harm when young and intention when older. Rather, they apply varied integration rules in which the different factors are combined additively, multiplicatively, or configurally. However, additive rules seem to predominate. Children at all ages use both intention and harm in forming their judgments, with developmental changes in the weight given these factors being gradual rather than stagelike (Grueneich, 1982; Surber, 1977). Detailed analysis of the rules people apply to information containing many factors can clarify better the processes governing moral judgment than can global attributional analyses of whether outcomes are attributed to personal causation or to external circumstances.

More work remains to be done on how people deal with large sets of morally relevant factors, how social influences alter the weight they give to different factors, and what types of combinatorial rules they use. We noted earlier that humans are not all that adept at integrating diverse information. As in other judgmental domains, when faced with complexities, most people probably fall back on judgmental heuristics that give too much weight to a few moral factors while ignoring other relevant ones. Consistent social feedback can produce lasting changes in the rules used to judge the morality of action (Schleifer & Douglas, 1973). However, in everyday life social consensus on morality is difficult to come by, thus creating ambiguity about the correctness of judgment. In the absence of consistent feedback, reliance on convenient heuristics may become routinized to the point where moral judgments are rendered without giving much thought to individuating features of moral situations. The susceptibility of moral judgment to change depends in part on the effects of the actions it fosters. People alter what they think by experiencing the social effects of their actions.

Relation between Moral Reasoning and Conduct

An issue that has received surprisingly little attention is the relationship between moral reasoning and moral conduct. The study of moral reasoning would be of limited interest if people's moral codes and thoughts had no effect on how they behaved. In the stage theory of moral maturity, the structure of moral thought is not linked to particular conduct. This is because each level of moral reasoning can be used to support or to disavow transgressive behavior. People may act prosocially or transgressively out of mutual obligation, for social approval, for duty to the social order, or for reasons of principle. A person's level of moral development may indicate the types of reasons likely to be most persuasive to that person, but it does not ensure any particular kind of conduct.

The implications for human conduct of the stage theory of moral maturity are difficult to test empirically because conflicting claims are made about how moral reasoning is linked to behavior. On the one hand, it is contended that the level of moral reasoning does not sponsor a certain kind of behavior (Kohlberg, 1971a). Hence, in studies designed to alter moral perspectives through exposure to moral argument, the same level of reasoning is used, for example, for and against stealing (Rest, Turiel, & Kohlberg, 1969). On the other hand, a positive relationship is claimed between level of moral reasoning and moral conduct—the higher the moral reasoning, the more likely is moral conduct, and the greater is the consistency between moral judgment and conduct (Kohlberg & Candee, 1984).

Studies on whether stages of moral reasoning are linked to characteristic types of conduct are inconsistent in their findings (Blasi, 1980; Kurtines & Greif, 1974). Some researchers report that moral conduct is related to the level of moral reasoning, but others have failed to find such a relationship. Some of the studies routinely cited as

corroborating such a link have not withstood replication. Others are seen under close scrutiny as contradicting it or as uninterpretable because of methodological deficiencies (Kupfersmid & Wonderly, 1980). Moreover, relationships may disappear when controls are applied for other differences between persons at varying levels of moral reasoning, such as general intelligence (Rushton, 1975).

Efforts to verify the link between moral thought and action have raised disputes about the designation of moral conduct. Kohlberg and Candee (1984) argue that it is performers' intentions that define their actions as moral or immoral. If the morality of conduct is defined by the intentions voiced by transgressors, then most behavior that violates the moral codes of society will come out laundered as righteous. People can easily find moral reasons to redefine their misdeeds as, in reality, well-intentioned acts. They become more adept at self-serving justifications as they gain cognitive facility. Presumed intent always enters in as one factor in the social labeling of behavior (Bandura, 1973), but intention is never used as the sole definer of conduct. A robber who had a good intent would not thereby transform robbery into nonrobbery. A theory of morality must explain the determinants and the mechanisms governing transgressive conduct, not only how perpetrators justify it. This requires a broader conception of morality than is provided by a rationalistic approach cast in terms of skill in abstract reasoning.

In social cognitive theory, how moral thought affects conduct is not entirely an intrapsychic affair. Rather, it involves a reciprocity of influence between thought, conduct, and social factors. People are ordinarily deterred by anticipatory self-censure from engaging in behavior that violates their moral principles. This process of self-regulation, which involves moral standards, judgments, and self-generated affective consequences, operates interactively within a network of social influences. Under social