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Applied Developmental Psychology 26 (2005) 235–240

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**Applied  
Developmental  
Psychology**

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## Book review

### **Today, moral identity; tomorrow, self-esteem?**

Daniel K. Lapsley, Darcia Narvaez, (Eds.), *Moral development, self, and identity*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ, 2004, ISBN: 0-8048-4286-1, xiii + 358 pp., \$79.95 (cloth)

From the 1960s through the early 1990s, research in moral psychology was dominated by Lawrence Kohlberg's developmental theory of moral reasoning about justice issues. In the Kohlberg tradition, the moral domain was circumscribed down to issues of interpersonal justice, rights, and promise-keeping; morality was considered to be a matter of impersonal rules and principles, not of habits, skills, or virtues; moral development was seen as a progression toward sorting out genuinely moral rules, first from personal goals and projects, then from social conventions; and the cognitive structures involved in moral reasoning were treated as though they applied automatically to any situation to which they could be seen as relevant.

An important step toward broadening the scope of moral development research and establishing badly needed connections with neighboring areas of psychological inquiry was taken in 1980, when Augusto Blasi published his review article on the relationship between moral cognition and moral action. Discerning a failure to come to grips with moral motivation, and a need to integrate moral psychology with the psychology of the self, Blasi argued that people who have incorporated morality strongly into their own identities are more likely to act on their moral principles. Those for whom morality does not play a key role in their self-definitions may subscribe to the very same principles, but are less likely to put them into practice.

Over the past generation, Blasi has been elaborating and testing his theory of moral identity while the study of moral psychology has been radiating out in several directions. Today researchers are busily inquiring into matters once seen as off-topic, such as individuals' personal conceptions of morality, and their moral exemplars (those who they think set an example worth emulating). Efforts are under way to reconstruct the moral virtues in light of today's theories of personality and of social cognition, and to build a new understanding of the way that honesty and generosity and other aspects of moral character are acquired.

So a Festschrift for Augusto Blasi is a timely undertaking. *Moral Development, Self, and Identity* collects 13 essays by moral development researchers, each responding in a different way to Blasi's theories of moral motivation. In the final chapter Blasi gives his current conception of moral identity a clear, economical statement while responding to several of his sharper critics in a pithy but generous fashion. Except for Bergman's review and comparison of theories of moral identity, which

previously appeared in *Human Development*, and Nucci's critique of the "moral self construct," which was first published in a Jean Piaget Society volume, the chapters in this Festschrift were specially written for it.

Even in a collection organized around the non-Kohlbergian notion of moral identity, there are some lingering attachments to Kohlberg's developmental theory. Edelstein and Krettenauer's chapter seems to hold onto Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning (and to cognates such as Selman's stages of perspective-taking or Loevinger's stages of ego development) because of their analogy with Piaget's stages of development. Evidently Edelstein and Krettenauer are restricted by the kinds of data that they can extract from a longitudinal study conducted in Iceland, which included assessments of reasoning at these kinds of stages. But they also see value in asking what helps some people attain the highest stages, while most others do not.

Most of the contributors do move well beyond Kohlberg, however, in one or another of the directions that Blasi has helped to set. For instance, Walker's chapter surveys people's conceptions of moral personality, finding three different prototypes of moral character; it also calls into question the Kohlberg framework's wall of separation between moral reasons and religious beliefs. Accounting for moral character without falling back on trait theories of personality is the entire purpose of Lapsley and Narvaez's chapter. Moral motivation is the prime topic for several authors: Nisan argues for a distinction between "judgments of evaluation" and "judgments of choice"; Nunner-Winkler describes changes over the past three generations in the kinds of reasons German participants give for not breaking different kinds of moral rules; and Puka tries to sort out what altruistic motivation might consist of. Moral identity comes to the fore in Bergman's chapter, Power's, Moshman's, and Wren and Mendoza's.

Some contributors are even moving in directions not contemplated by Blasi. Like Kohlberg, Blasi sets moral values across a gulf from "nonmoral" values and self-interest. Moral considerations cannot aim at what is good for the actor; they must either aim at the good of other actors, or be wholly impersonal, applying equally to all. Consequently, in his roundup and reply, Blasi worries that moral motives may easily become adulterated:

Most of us understand moral norms, see them as desirable, are sensitive to the moral good, and are in principle motivated by it; but only sometimes (the frequency varies from person to person) the moral motivation embedded in moral understanding is effective in producing action... In the case of morality... adequate solutions [to the problem of insufficient motivation] are only those that respect the intrinsic desirability of moral claims. Weak moral motives may need to be reinforced, but without losing their character of desiring the moral good for its own sake (p. 341).

Particularly objectionable to Blasi is Nisan's "judgment of choice," which is "accepted on the basis of what can justifiably be called moral judgment, that, is a judgment based on perception of the right and the good... It is guided by an intention to preserve the individual's self-image as a moral person (while fulfilling his aims) rather than by an intention to obey moral standards" (p. 155). Yet judgments of choice take into account "particularistic considerations, such as personal loyalties and projects that are very meaningful to the individual" and that the individual cannot deny without "negating himself and subverting his status as an agent" (p. 155). For Nisan, a judgment of choice is part of a moral decision; for Blasi, such a judgment threatens the decision's moral status.

Blasi acknowledges that the kind of “understanding” required for moral decisions may be quite different from anything envisioned by Kohlberg, but stops well short of endorsing a moral psychology of virtue. In a chapter that responds to a major need in the field, Lapsley and Narvaez dig deeply into contemporary research on social cognition for the resources to account for something that a virtue-based moral psychology badly needs: an account of moral personality no longer reliant on static, overgeneralized traits. They make considerable progress in their search for higher-order invariants in our ways of dealing with our social environment that can account for “lawful situational variability” (p. 198). Schema accessibility, spontaneous trait inferences, nonconscious self-regulation, and event representations will all figure in future discussions of moral personality.

Some of the authors forage even more widely, grabbing up and bringing back Cross’ theory of group identity (in Wren and Mendoza’s chapter) or Bourdieu’s conception of habitus (in Nunner-Winkler’s). It is odd, then, to see ideas as close to the center of moral psychology as Aristotle’s being handled with oven mitts.

The only discussion of Aristotle in the volume occupies just over a page. And it appears in a chapter whose author is staunchly opposed to any kind of Aristotelian influence on moral development studies. Nucci aims to defend a research program that discards Kohlberg’s stage theory of moral judgment while retaining his sharp circumscription of the moral domain. From Nucci’s standpoint, Blasi’s notion that people may act the way they do because they want to be a certain kind of person is either unnecessary to account for moral decisions, or serves to undermine them by replacing moral considerations with instrumental, “nonmoral” ones. In the course of warning moral developmentalists against expanding the moral domain or relying on any notion of moral character, Nucci avoids direct contact with Aristotle’s text. He relies exclusively on Nussbaum (1986), whose well-informed interpretation of Aristotle rewards study—but is hardly the only one worth consulting. None of the other chapters ever refers directly to Aristotle.

This is distinctly odd, considering that we live in an era when Aristotle is not only taken as a source of inspiration by philosophical advocates of virtue ethics, but has become a guiding light to the Positive Psychology movement (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and even to some moral developmentalists (e.g., Lapsley, 1996).

What’s more, the writings of Aristotle (1962) still offer resources untapped and problems unframed by today’s moral psychologists. Keller and her collaborators present a study of Icelandic and Chinese teenagers’ thoughts about friendship and the moral obligations it brings. They miss an opportunity to explore how friendship plays a major role in the *Nicomachean Ethics*—and none whatsoever in the Kantian tradition on which Kohlberg drew.

Absolutely central to Aristotle’s theory is *phronesis* (variously translated as practical wisdom, practical intelligence, or prudence). Acting in accordance with the virtues requires practical wisdom because otherwise the actor’s behavior will not be contextually appropriate. Practical wisdom is a form of expertise that must be acquired through practice and by example; it cannot be reduced to explicit rules. Practical wisdom is hinted at in Nisan’s chapter; his judgments of choice are context-sensitive, and seek a “fit” between the actor’s “current gestalt of the good person” and the current situation after acting (p. 156). Lapsley and Narvaez do more than hint; for them, “Effective habits, scripted behavioral sequences, self-regulation, chronic accessibility of knowledge structures, and moral perception might constitute the procedural aspect of moral functioning, and they fall under the heading of character—of knowing how” (pp. 204–205).

Yet even as they emphasize both expertise and subconscious processes in moral decision making, Lapsley and Narvaez never mention practical wisdom—which surely is vital to their overall program (or to any other research program that seeks to reorient the study of moral development along the lines of virtue ethics). Indeed, knowledge structures and cognitive processes as understood in information-processing psychology might not always be the best adapted to account for practical wisdom: the work of Klein (1998) and other naturalistic decision-making researchers certainly suggests alternatives to them. And Lapsley and Narvaez’s strong reliance on accounts that treat all decision making as nonconscious puts them at odds with Aristotle over conscious deliberation, which he thought was required for some moral decisions.

To take up another theme in Ancient moral philosophy, authors like Walker or Lapsley and Narvaez are by implication denying the unity of the virtues: the notion that one cannot be truly just unless one is courageous, indeed, that one cannot genuinely attain one virtue without attaining them all. But visions of unity exerted a powerful attraction on all of the Ancient moral philosophers, including Aristotle. So did the notion, not nearly so often discussed today, of a single, global form of practical wisdom (Annas, 1993). Indeed, if one takes practical wisdom as a global capability, one has traveled most of the distance from Aristotle’s moral psychology to the moral psychology of the Stoics, which has yet to draw any attention from moral developmentalists at all. For a variety of reasons, I think today’s moral psychologists will much prefer domain-specific forms of practical wisdom. But here is a problem space that lies virtually uncharted.

Finally, Aristotle thought of the virtues as self-regarding (as aimed at, or constitutive of, the best kind of life for each individual actor). For Aristotle, being just and acting justly are good *for the just person*, not merely for the other people whom he or she treats justly. In Book IX Chapter 8 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that the true egoist is not the person who wants to grab every opportunity or pleasure and outdo everyone else, but rather the person who practices the virtues. The frankly self-regarding aspect of his moral psychology continues to pose difficulties for many of the contributors to this volume: the disagreement between Blasi and Nisan over “judgments of choice” is but one example.

Could this be why only Power’s chapter really looks into the connections between moral identity and self-esteem? Power has difficulty deciding whether self-esteem should be contingent (on approval from other people, or on past successes in personally important domains) or unconditional and inherent in being human. While these points of view can be found in the broader literature on self-esteem, there are also clinical theories like the one by Bednar and Peterson (1995), in which self-esteem is strengthened by coping with issues in one’s life that provoke anxiety, and weakened by avoiding or denying them. There are theories like the one by Branden (1994), in which high, stable self-esteem is maintained through such practices as being mindful, taking responsibility for one’s actions, accepting the truth about oneself, and insisting on acting in accordance with one’s values. In such accounts of self-esteem, its maintenance is directly tied to the practice of virtues, even to the person’s moral identity.

Virtue-based accounts of self-esteem emphasize that a person’s self-esteem can be defensive in nature, appearing to be much higher than a frank, realistic evaluation of the person’s own competence or worthiness would indicate. Defensive self-esteem cannot be sustained without self-deception and inauthenticity, and is vulnerable to challenge and deflation whenever evidence against the self-deceptions crops up. This, in turn, makes defensive self-esteem look like a broader version, frequently employing less extreme defenses, of the false moral identity that is the topic of Moshman’s chapter in this volume.

Moshman contends that those who think of themselves as deeply committed to the rights and welfare of others, but behave in ways that are obviously inconsistent with their self-conception, have a moral identity-but it is a false one. He provides a powerful case study, involving the members of a battalion during the 1980s civil war in El Salvador who systematically massacred hundreds of civilians in order to spread terror among the people in the surrounding district. It was not just the soldiers who carried out the massacre who resorted to denial, rationalization, and evasion of relevant evidence to protect their moral identities. Many of those who supported their side in the civil war, both in El Salvador and the United States, did likewise. Unfortunately, the last century has provided abundant opportunities for the development of such false moral identities (see, for example, [Courtois et al., 1998](#)), but in relatively few cases have the reactions of the perpetrators been so meticulously documented.

That there might be a connection between virtue, moral identity, and self-esteem is not exactly a new idea. From his discussion of who is the genuine egoist, Aristotle concluded that:

Therefore, a good man should be a self-lover, for he will himself profit by performing noble actions and will benefit his fellow men. But a wicked man should not love himself, since he will harm both himself and his neighbors in following his base emotions. What a wicked man does is not in harmony with what he ought to do, whereas a good man does what he ought to do. For intelligence always chooses what is best for itself, and a good man obeys his intelligence (1169a 11–17).

Apart from the Aristotelian legacy, whose implications for moral development research are still being worked out, a couple of schools of thought that are well established in contemporary moral psychology could have used a little more attention. None of the contributors speaks for Gilligan's theory of justice and care orientations; however, in his work on moral personality prototypes, Walker shows how people think in terms of a "caring exemplar" as well as a "brave exemplar" and a "just exemplar." Nor is anyone representing research on the development of "prosocial" behavior, although Puka makes some trenchant observations about the way that social psychologists think about altruism.

And apparently because most moral development researchers see Kohlberg's theory and Piaget's as standing and falling together, the contributors do not address the possibility of reconstructing Piagetian theory so as to accommodate moral identity. Could this be done if stages of development were redefined in terms of reflective abstraction ([Piaget, 1977/2001](#)), instead of the specific cognitive structures that Piaget or Kohlberg thought were responsible for various kinds of reasoning? Is there a different psychological ontology that could encompass values, practical wisdom, identity, and self-esteem more readily than Piaget's cognitive structures did? A theory reoriented toward reflective abstraction would have a relatively easy time accounting for second-order desires (i.e., desires about what desires one ought to have). For Blasi, having a moral identity does not mean having moral desires; it means desiring that one's moral desires be the ones that end up guiding one's actions. Recent efforts to sketch a reflective-abstraction-based theory of moral development (e.g. [Campbell, Christopher, & Bickhard, 2002](#); [Moshman, 1995](#)) may still have something to offer to research on moral identity.

While most of the contributors to this volume are frank about the need to find new ways of studying moral psychology, and provide both theoretical suggestions and programs of empirical research, I suspect they would be modest about the immediate applications of their work. The chapter by Atkins, Hart, and Donnelly presents data from the 1999 National Household Education Survey indicating a relationship between moral identity and school attachment. Edelstein and Krettenauer present some evidence that higher levels of education and lower levels of internalizing problems specifically facilitate

the transition to postconformist levels of ego development (in Loevinger's model). But readers who are primarily interested in applications will be better served by the forthcoming volume on character education, edited by Lapsley and Power (in press).

I trust, though, that most potential readers will have patience with the basic research orientation, on account of the importance of moral identity and the issues that it raises. There is so much to think about in each chapter that every student of moral development will benefit from reading this book.

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