

Models of Moral Development

Stephen J. Thoma
University of Alabama

This paper discusses the Alldredge, Derryberry, Crowson, and Iran-Nejad (2000) bio-functional model of morality. It first notes that Alldredge et al. join many others who question the orthodox Kohlbergian model of moral development, especially with regard to the singular focus on moral cognition and relatively little attention to moral behavior. Then, to provide a context for the biofunctional model, the Alldredge et al. approach to model building is contrasted with other recent descriptions of moral functioning. Finally, the paper discusses the potential of the biofunctional model to stimulate empirical work.

In their paper, Alldredge, Derryberry, Crowson, and Iran-Nejad (2000, this issue) raise a fundamental question regarding the study of moral development: Is it profitable to continue exploring the construct by focusing on its various components or should we instead attempt to assess the system that unifies moral functioning? Alldredge et al. clearly propose the latter. Indeed, Alldredge et al. suggest that until we focus at the system level our attempts to explain such things as moral behavior will be fleeting at best. Although, Alldredge et al. are the first to apply the biofunctional model to the moral domain, the issues they raise have a long history in moral psychology. My intent, therefore, is to highlight how others have addressed similar issues and concerns in the hope that the reader will be better able to place the current work in an historical context.

The Central Role of Behavior in Recent Models of Moral Development

Alldredge et al. suggest that a major benefit of adopting a biofunctional model of moral development is to better explain moral behavior. In making

this claim, Alldredge et al. join a number of theorists who have also focused on moral behavior within models of moral development (see reviews by Blasi, 1980; Rest, 1983). In general, these theorists highlight the shortcomings of current models in explaining behavior and argue that moral behavior ought to be a chief criterion variable for models of moral functioning (see especially Blasi, 1980). Indeed, one could argue that an interest in moral behavior drives much of the recent theoretical discussions in the field (e.g., Rest, 1983; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma, 1999).

Allredge et al. are correct in noting that an interest in moral action was not at the forefront of moral development theorizing when the field first experienced its expansion following Kohlberg's introduction of his theory in the late 1950s and 1960s. At that time, many researchers argued in favor of a central focus on moral cognitions. By contrast, moral behavior was given secondary status and was discussed primarily in the context of distinguishing the cognitive developmental approach to moral functioning from the social learning perspective. Some even argued that it mattered little whether moral cognition was related to actions — just knowing how people understood and reasoned about moral issues was important in its own right (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969).

Part of the motivation in keeping the focus squarely on moral cognition was political. As Kohlberg and others noted, it was very important to distinguish the newer interest in moral cognition from both an earlier preoccupation with emotions and family processes associated with the psychodynamic tradition and the focus on moral actions associated with the social learning theorists (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969, Walker, 1988; Walker and Taylor, 1991). Thus, part of the scattering of effort identified by Alldredge et al. is due in large measure to the characteristic ways theorists tend to define themselves in contrast to competing interests and explanations.

In the late 1970s it became apparent to cognitive developmentalists that a singular focus on cognition was no longer tenable. An earlier important review by Kurtines and Grief (1973, both authors were associated at that time with the social learning tradition) made much of the fact that so little empirical work focused on behavior. Responding to this review forced Kohlberg and his colleagues to better identify exactly how moral cognitions were related to behaviors (Kohlberg and Candee, 1983; Lickona, 1976). Alldredge et al. are accurate in noting that in current terms, the results of these theoretical descriptions of the judgment and action link are incomplete. However, Alldredge et al.'s description of the basic theory, relating judgment with action, misses some of the subtleties of Kohlberg's model. The basic message provided by traditional cognitive developmental models of moral judgment is that moral cognitions help the individual identify who is affected by the situation, establish the precedence of various claims, and

indicate what one ought to do in the concrete situation. That is, moral cognitions exist in order for us to identify relevant information and problem-solve within moral situations (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969).

In addition, cognitive developmentalists propose that as the individual develops more sophisticated moral understandings, he/she is able to form more adequate definitions of the moral situation and is thus able to more adequately construct a behavioral response. For instance, Kohlberg's theory suggests that an individual reasoning at the preconventional level views a moral situation in terms of the potential threats and benefits to the self. Similarly, the products of this interpretation, such as moral action, would be constrained by this narrow and inadequate moral definition. Further, it is assumed that with development the behavioral choices become more optimal since they are constructed within the broad and encompassing moral definitions offered by the higher moral levels. Thus, moral judgment and moral actions are linked insofar as the ability to accurately define a moral situation leads to a more adequately constructed behavioral response.

On the positive side, however, the focus on moral behavior did lead cognitive developmentalists to acknowledge the importance of behavior. During the 1980s it became common to hear that further investments in the field should be tied to a better understanding of how and under what conditions people act in moral situations. Most agreed that a failure to support the link between moral judgments and action would severely diminish the status of the field within developmental psychology and education. Blasi's review in 1980 is typically used as the point at which this view became prevalent (e.g., Rest, 1983).

Fueled by this growing interest in moral behavior in the 1980s, a number of reviews were published that were designed to assess the current status of the empirical relationships between moral judgment and behavior (e.g., Arnold, 1989; Blasi 1980; Thoma and Rest, 1986). These reviews used a variety of methodologies to summarize studies ranging from Blasi's detailed narrative review to more statistical summary techniques (i.e., meta-analyses). Not mentioned in the Alldredge et al. paper was that these reviews reached very similar conclusions: various measures of moral judgment development are related to moral actions. However, the magnitude of these relationships is not large. Thus, there was good news and bad news in these reviews. The good news was the existence of a stable relationship between measures of moral judgment and moral action. That is, there is some overlap between how individuals reason about moral issues and their behavior in morally charged situations as predicted by the Kohlberg model (Colby and Kohlberg, 1987; Kohlberg, 1969).

The bad news, however was the lack of clarity concerning how one should improve on these findings? For the most part, the studies under review

related a measure of moral judgment with an action, and the overall strength of the association was reported — the studies addressed the question of whether or not a relationship exists but little else.

During the beginning of the 1980s therefore, the field of moral psychology was at a crossroad. Having given up a singular focus on moral cognition and now willing to explore moral emotions, moral actions, etc., it was apparent that new models were needed. But which strategy held the most promise in identifying the additional features of moral functioning that were required to bolster models of moral development?

Patching the Holes in Moral Theories: Different Approaches and Conceptual Models

To overcome these shortcomings in models of moral functions, researchers went in two directions. One route was to continue to frame studies within the traditional model of the judgment and action link. That is, continue to relate moral judgments with moral actions but design studies that could better account for the methodological and conceptual problems that were identified in the review papers (e.g., Blasi, 1980). The hope expressed by these researchers was that by improving the quality of the studies, one could provide a more accurate picture of the judgment and action link (e.g., Blasi, 1980; Thoma, 1994). Although helpful in clarifying the magnitude of the relationship between moral judgments and action, the limitations of this approach became apparent. First, it was noted that even in the better studies, the magnitude of the relationship between judgment and action remained moderate (Rest, 1983). Second, was a growing sense that correlational studies were inherently limited in identifying processes that might help better explain moral behavior (Blasi, 1980). Thus, more and more researchers opted for an alternative path.

The alternative path selected by most researchers was built around the assumption that empirical data provided a fairly accurate description of the contribution of moral cognition in the production of moral behavior. In short, researchers concluded that the problem wasn't methodological — it was conceptual (e.g., Rest, 1983). Like Alldredge et al., these researchers acknowledged that general interpretive systems such as moral judgments are insufficient predictors of specific behaviors in specific situations. In general, the concerns raised by these authors relate to the lack of a detailed explanation of the processes that link a general understanding of a situation with the subsidiary choices that are more closely linked to the situation and eventual action choice (Blasi, 1980; Rest, 1983; Thoma, 1994). Further, these researchers wondered how emotions, personality characteristics and other social-cognitive processes interacted with moral cognition (see Blasi, 1980; Rest, 1983). The question was and to a great extent still is: How should the

field proceed in the service of better identifying what else is needed to improve our understanding of moral functioning, and in so doing, to better understand morality?

Toward this goal, one can identify two important approaches to model building. One perspective, exemplified by the Alldredge et al. paper, presents theoretical arguments that highlight the holistic nature of moral function. Models associated with this perspective have in common the assumption that breaking down moral functioning into different components is counter-productive because morality is by definition the integration of different sub-systems. That is, a focus on cognition, emotions, and actions can not recover the moral system that cuts across these aspects of human functioning. Additionally, these descriptions focus on moral action and strongly suggest that a holistic approach is the only direct way to study action. Typically the guiding system proposed in these papers is the self and associated self-systems (Blasi, 1984). For instance, Blasi (1980) states:

What appears to be needed is an explicit and direct focus on the psychological nature of integrity or of personal consistency, that is, on the processes and skills involved in the capacity to invest one's life with the meanings that are personally understood and accepted and to act in ways that are consistent with one's normal insights Integrity and its failure cannot be studied without taking seriously into account the self and related constructs, such as self-definition, self-organization, self-awareness, and sensitivity to internal inconsistency. (pp. 40-41)

If one were to substitute biofunctional system descriptors for Blasi's description of the self-system, the basic argument for the process of model building and promise of the two approaches would be similar. Thus, the Alldredge et al. paper can be seen as one of a number of theoretical approaches that propose a more global focus to model building.

A focus on the global moral system is not the only approach to model building. For example, an equally active group of researchers propose models of moral functioning that explicitly attend to specific moral processes that individually and in interaction influence moral behavior (e.g., Bebeau, 1994; Kohlberg and Candee, 1983; Rest, 1983; Rest and Narvaez, 1994; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma, 1999). These researchers hope to build upon the finding of a stable moral judgment and action link and identify other empirically derived processes that can — when tied to moral cognition — provide a more detailed picture of morality. It is further assumed that in so doing, these empirically driven model expansions can better explain moral functioning as well as moral development.

There are a number of examples of this approach. For instance, Kohlberg's addition of the A/B sub-stage distinction to his stage model is one example of expanding current models to better account for moral action (Tappan,

Kohlberg, Schrader, Higgins, Armon, and Lei, 1987). A more differentiated model is proposed in Rest's four component model (Rest, 1983). Central to this model is the assumption that moral actions are the end result of four conceptually distinct processes (i.e., Component 1: moral sensitivity; Component 2: moral judgments; Component 3: moral motivation; and Component 4: moral character) operating together and in interaction. Although the model clearly retains a cognitive developmental emphasis on moral judgments, it regulates these processes to a more moderate role in the moral system (e.g., as one of four other processes). Additionally, it should be noted that affective as well as behavioral aspects of morality are assumed in the model (e.g., Rest, 1983; see also Blasi, 1980 for another approach). Thus it is not accurate to suggest that the field resists the integration of affective, cognitive and behavioral aspects of morality — most current models assume this integration.

The proceeding discussion attempts to highlight three main points. First, the Alldredge et al. paper is best viewed as part of a larger movement that began in the 1970s to shore up models of moral functioning when it became apparent that moral cognition could not fully account for the moral domain. Second, the major issue driving this model building was the moral behavior question, and in particular the failure of earlier models to explain individuals' actions within specific situations. Finally, the field of moral psychology is currently offered two basic approaches designed to clarify moral functioning. The first characterized by the Alldredge et al. paper is a top-down model building approach that asks us to attend to the holistic nature of social moral functioning. The second is a bottom-up approach that focuses on the identification of specific processes that coexist with moral cognitions and offer additional information about moral functioning. Thus, in contrast to the Alldredge et al. claim that the major debate in the field is framed by narrative/social versus cognitive versus behavioral approaches to moral development, it can be argued that the debate is centered on how best to approach the model building process.

In many ways the two views on model building are complementary and have to be linked. For instance, moral processes have to be held together by some superordinate system (e.g., the self) in order to maintain consistency and organization over time. Similarly, the self-system must activate some mechanism by which specific sources of information are understood. In short, the distinction between these two approaches is somewhat arbitrary. However, where these two models appear different is in their potential to stimulate empirical work.

Currently the bottom-up approach characterized by Rest's four component model has led to a steady stream of empirical work not matched by the top-down models (Rest et al., 1999). For instance, Rest's model provides a

number of well-defined directions for researchers interested in understanding moral functioning. The first direction, for example, relates to the assessment of components and the development of empirical estimates of their contribution to moral functioning (e.g., moral sensitivity, moral judgments, moral motivation and moral character). Thus, moving forward in the description and assessment of the processes described by the four components is one direction for programmatic research on moral action.

In addition, the four component model has been used to structure ethics education in both the schools and professions (i.e., Bebeau, Rest, and Narvaez, 1999). Bebeau's (1994) work in ethics education in dentistry and other health professions explicitly frames her curriculum using Rest's model. It is currently one of the most highly touted ethics programs in the health professions. In short, the ability of bottom-up approaches to stimulate high quality research is a strength not currently found in top-down approaches. Indeed, after reading the Alldredge et al. paper it is still unclear what steps one would take to operationalize their approach.

In summary, the overarching goal of current moral theories is to move beyond a singular focus on any one aspect of moral functioning. Clearly, the field has matured beyond a simple carving up of the moral domain into the emotional, behavioral and cognitive spheres. This maturation process has been encouraged, in part, by theorists like Alldredge et al. who highlight the holistic nature of morality and in so doing focus our attention on how the pieces of moral functioning fit together. It will be interesting to see if these holistic approaches can further the empirical base as well.

References

- Allredge, S., Derryberry, P., Crowson, M., and Iran-Nejad, A. (2000). Rethinking the origin of morality and moral development. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 21, 105-128.
- Arnold, M. (1989, April). *Moral cognition and conduct: A quantitative review of the literature*. Paper presented to the Society for Research in Child Development, Kansas City, Missouri.
- Bebeau, M. (1994). Influencing the moral dimension of dental practice. In J. Rest and D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Moral development in the professions* (pp. 121-147). Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bebeau, M., Rest, J., and Narvaez, D. (1999). Beyond the promise: A perspective for research in moral education. *Educational Researcher*, 28, 4-14.
- Blasi, A. (1980). Bridging moral cognition and moral action: A critical review of the literature. *Psychological Bulletin*, 88, 93-637.
- Blasi, A. (1984). Moral identity: Its role in moral functioning. In W. Kurtines and J. Gewirtz (Eds.), *Morality, moral behavior, and moral development: Basic issues in theory and research* (pp. 125-146). New York: Academic Press.
- Colby, A., and Kohlberg, L. (1987). *The measurement of moral judgment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kohlberg, L. (1969). Stage and sequence. The cognitive-developmental approach to socialization. In Goslin (Ed.), *Handbook of socialization theory and research* (pp. 347-480). Chicago: Rand McNally.

- Kohlberg, L., and Candee, D. (1983). The relation of moral judgment to moral action. In W. Kurtines and J. Gewirtz (Eds.), *Morality, moral behavior, and moral development: Basic issues in theory and research* (pp. 27–56). New York: Wiley Interscience.
- Kurtines, W., and Grief, E. (1974). The development of moral thought: Review and evaluation of Kohlberg's approach. *Psychological Bulletin*, 81, 453–470.
- Likona, T. (1976). *Moral development and behavior*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Rest, J.R. (1983). Morality. In P. Mussen (Series Ed.), and J. Flavell and E. Markman (Volume Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Volume 3, cognitive development* (fourth edition, pp. 556–629). New York: Wiley.
- Rest, J.R., Narvaez, D., Bebeau, M., and Thoma, S.J. (1999). *Postconventional moral thinking: A Neo-Kohlbergian approach*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Tappan, M., Kohlberg, L., Schrader, D., Higgins, A., Armon, C., and Lei, T. (1987). Heteronomy and autonomy in moral development: Two types of moral judgments. In A. Colby and L. Kohlberg (Eds.), *The measurement of moral judgment* (pp. 315–375). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thoma, S.J. (1994). Moral judgment and moral actions. In J. Rest and D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Moral development in the professions* (pp. 199–212). Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Thoma, S.J., and Rest, J.R. (1986). Moral judgment, behavior, decision-making, and attitudes. In J.R. Rest (Ed.), *Moral development: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 133–175). New York: Praeger.
- Walker L. (1988). The development of moral reasoning. *Annals of Child Development*, 5, 33–78.
- Walker L., and Taylor, J.H. (1991). Family interactions and the development of moral reasoning. *Child Development*, 62, 264–283.