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Moral Clarity

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Abstract

We examine the process by which people come to possess different levels of moral clarity, which denotes the degree of ambiguity people perceive when judging whether behaviors are right or wrong (Wiltermuth & Flynn, 2013). We first argue that moral clarity is higher when people rely on intuition rather than deliberation when making moral judgments. We posit that clarity may be greatest when people are experiencing emotions associated with certainty appraisals. Next, we examine the processes that give rise to heightened levels of moral clarity. We note how these processes parallel the processes that give rise to certainty in attitudes not related to morality, but then review how the consequences of moral clarity and certainty on non-moral issues differ. We then describe how moral clarity has both innate origins and can be heightened or repressed depending upon the influence of parents, teachers, peers, etc. Finally, we outline predictions about how moral clarity may differ by culture.

Moral Clarity

Some people are baffled that others seem to see behavior in such clear terms of right and wrong, good and bad, and black and white. They struggle to understand how those others miss so much nuance that they do not recognize that it is not always clear whether behaviors are morally right or morally wrong. Those who do see clear distinctions between right and wrong are equally baffled by the inability of those who see shades of gray everywhere to diagnose right from wrong, good from bad, and black from white.

These differences in moral clarity, which denotes the degree of ambiguity people perceive when judging whether behaviors are right or wrong (Wiltermuth & Flynn, 2013), may be socially determined. In this chapter, we explore how people develop a sense of moral clarity and why individuals differ in how much ambiguity they perceive in moral judgments. We first examine whether a sense of moral clarity is more likely to develop from intuitive or deliberative forms of processing. We then examine which cognitive processes are likely to give rise to a heightened sense of moral clarity. We investigate specifically if the processes are general insofar as they also give rise to certainty in non-moral judgments or if they are specific to moral judgments. We also examine how the consequences of moral clarity differ from the consequences of certainty on non-moral issues. Next, we address whether people have a fixed, innate sense of moral clarity, or if moral clarity is a learned attitude that is, at times, cultivated and, at other times, suppressed through education. Finally, we discuss whether cultural values, such as individualism/collectivism and power distance, influence the degree to which people see ambiguity in the judgment of moral behaviors.

Intuitive vs. Deliberative

Moral clarity may be greater with intuition than with deliberation

Intuition is a kind of cognition, contrasted with reasoning, which occurs quickly, effortlessly, and automatically, such that the outcome but not the process is accessible to

consciousness (Haidt, 2001). Haidt's model of intuitive ethics proposes that moral intuitions are activated immediately in response to morally relevant facts, with effortful, deliberative moral reasoning occurring only after a judgment has already been made. Empirical studies have tended to confirm the view that affective intuition plays a larger role than deliberate reasoning in the process of moral judgment (Greene & Haidt, 2002). People often claim to know with certainty that an action is morally wrong even when they cannot marshal reasoning to support their intuition (Haidt, 2007). Hence we might expect that judgments driven by intuition evince greater moral clarity than those reached through careful deliberation.

Research on the amount of time allowed to make decisions supports this expectation. Inhibiting deliberation through manipulations of time alters moral judgments in response to dilemmas involving the killing of one person to save many (Suter & Hertwig, 2011). Time pressure yields fast deontological gut reactions (e.g., killing is wrong) whereas time availability enables consequentialist deliberations (e.g., the lives of many outweigh the life of one) to override the initial response. Furthermore, direct manipulations of deliberative decision-making have been shown to increase deception and decrease altruism (Zhong, 2011), suggesting that deliberation obscures our intuitive understanding of moral behavior by permitting rationalization of unethical conduct.

These findings comport with work on the effect of the perceived time taken to generate an evaluation on attitude certainty (Tormala, Clarkson, & Henderson, 2011). Quick evaluations tend to promote certainty when people express opinions or evaluate familiar objects, whereas slow evaluations generally promote certainty when people form new opinions or evaluate unfamiliar objects. Morality is familiar to most adults, or even organized by evolutionary mechanisms in advance of individual experience (Haidt, 2007); it is reasonable to suppose that

moral judgment is more like expressing than forming an opinion. Thus moral judgment is most likely to demonstrate clarity when proceeding directly from intuition.

Tetlock's (2003) work on taboo tradeoffs indicates that we expect people to distinguish right from wrong quickly and easily, and excessive deliberation on the relative worth of sacred values (e.g., justice) may signal a lack of moral clarity and thereby cast doubt on an individual's moral character. Some exchanges (e.g., money for human dignity) are considered unthinkable, and people respond to the contemplation of such tradeoffs with moral outrage, cleansing, and value reaffirmation (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). Moral clarity displayed via intuitive judgment may therefore serve as a yardstick by which to measure ethical uprightness in ourselves and others.

Information processing and clarity

In contrast to the foregoing, research on information processing has at times implied that cognitive elaboration, or the thoughtfulness with which one considers information relevant to an evaluation, enhances attitude certainty (Smith, Fabrigar, MacDougall, & Wiesenhal, 2008). However, recent evidence suggests that this effect is driven primarily by people's perceptions of their own elaboration and naïve theories that elaboration produces better judgments (Barden & Tormala, 2014). Because of the fluency with which people can generate post-hoc reasoning to justify their intuitive judgments (Haidt, 2001), a quick, clear, intuitive moral judgment may often give rise to an impression of thoughtful processing.

Attitude accessibility is associated with greater attitude strength (Holland, Verplanken, & Van Knippenberg, 2003), entailing that intuitive judgments come stamped with the imprimatur of certainty by virtue of their ease of retrieval. Over a lifetime of experience and repetition, moral intuition is elevated to moral conviction. Clarity in moral judgment is also enhanced by the

certainty appraisals imbued in morally relevant emotions such as anger, disgust, happiness, and contentment (Tiedens & Linton, 2001). These emotions occur with a sense of certainty and promote heuristic (intuitive) processing, whereas emotions such as hope, surprise, worry, and sadness occur with a sense of uncertainty and promote systematic (deliberative) processing. If intuitive processes heighten perceptions of moral clarity, we would therefore expect people to perceive themselves to have greater moral clarity when experiencing emotions associated with certainty.

We may also expect cognitive depletion to result in greater moral clarity. Information processing is often inhibited by ego depletion, leading people to rely heavily on automatic processes such as intuition when they are ego-depleted (Baumeister, Muraven, & Tice, 2000). Research on consumer responses to advertising has found that attitudes formed under conditions of depletion exhibit greater certainty and influence on purchase behavior (Wan, Rucker, Tormala, & Clarkson, 2010). Feeling depleted may increase certainty through the perception that substantial information processing has taken place. Consequently, we may expect that ego depleted individuals will form moral judgments based on intuition and with a high degree of clarity.

Epiphanies and inspiration

Epiphanies and prophetic experiences, insofar as they impel individuals to adopt a particular course of conduct deemed virtuous or obligatory, may represent extreme versions of moral clarity. Those who experience divine communication frequently report it as thoughts or feelings simply appearing in their mind, accompanied by a sense of absolute clarity and authority (Dein & Cook, 2015). Epiphanic experiences are usually accompanied by awe, an emotion characterized primarily by a sense of vastness and a need for accommodation (Keltner & Haidt,

2003). It seems likely that the emotion of awe includes a certainty appraisal, which may drive the intense clarity associated with inspiration.

One, Two, or Many Processes

Degrees of clarity across moral domains

Individuals are predisposed to different trait levels of clarity in the moral domain (Wiltermuth & Flynn, 2013). However, the moral domain is not a monolith; moral foundations theory proposes the existence of plural moral domains whose values are sometimes in conflict (Graham et al., 2013). Morality is an adaptive characteristic of our species, born out of several clusters of innate intuitions naturally selected over countless generations of human development. In a similar vein, moral clarity may be an adaptation for successfully converting our moral intuitions into concordant behavior. We may therefore expect that, just as endorsement of each moral foundation (e.g., care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity) varies from person to person, so too does the clarity with which individuals form judgments in each domain. People who strongly endorse a particular moral foundation may experience greater certainty within that domain than would people for whom the same foundation is of lesser concern.

This view is substantiated by work showing the effect of moral foundations framing on political attitudes. Feinberg and Willer (2013) found that most environmental discourse centers on concerns of harm and care, with liberals but not conservatives viewing the environment in moral terms. Reframing environmental rhetoric in terms of purity reduces the gap between liberals and conservatives, suggesting a change in conservatives' moral judgments even on an issue for which they may have previously perceived little ambiguity. Framing issues using moral foundations may shift political attitudes through either entrenchment or persuasion (Day, Fiske, Downing, & Trail, 2014). Relevant moral foundation frames entrench political attitudes for both

liberals and conservatives, presumably by enhancing the moral clarity with which the issues are judged. Persuasion, on the other hand, has been found only for conservative-relevant moral frames of liberal issues. This is not to say that other instances of persuasion are impossible—clearly they occur all the time—but some framings may be more persuasive than others for specific types of people. Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) observed that conservatives endorse all five foundations about equally, while liberals assign preeminence to care and fairness. Conservatives may accordingly experience moral clarity in more varied contexts than do liberals.

Manichaeism and dogmatism

Manichaeism, originally a religion founded by the Iranian prophet Mani, now refers to any dualistic worldview that pits good against evil or us against them. Manichaean thinking may be an expression of high trait-level moral clarity, which leads people to experience the moral universe in black and white. Alternatively, individuals who are taught Manichaean thinking as dogma may resultantly develop greater clarity in judging relevant moral issues. Although powerful convictions about right and wrong may sometimes encourage prosocial behaviors, they also underlie acts of ideologically driven violence and terrorism (Skitka & Mullen, 2002).

Extreme views on both ends of the liberal-conservative spectrum are associated with dogmatic beliefs about the correctness of one's position (Toner, Leary, Asher, & Jongman-Sereno, 2013), yielding political intolerance that cuts both left and right (Crawford & Pilanski, 2014). Political partisans are likely to support discrimination against those who violate their moral values (Wetherell, Brandt, & Reyna, 2013), and conversation across the aisle may make the situation worse, not better: in developing their Manichaeism scale, Johnson, Motyl, and Graham (2015) found that individuals who discussed abortion or gun control with someone who held an opposing stance showed increases in Manichaeism compared to those who talked with

someone who agreed with them. Like visual acuity, moral clarity may be facilitated by the presence of contrast.

Persuasion

There is increasing acknowledgment that the primary function of human reasoning may be not epistemic but argumentative (Mercier & Sperber, 2011). Motivated reasoning is particularly evident in the selective application of general moral principles to rationalize preferred moral conclusions (Uhlmann, Pizarro, Tannenbaum, & Ditto, 2009). Rather than act as intuitive scientists seeking the truth, people behave like intuitive politicians, theologians, and prosecutors who advocate, protect, and enforce the values to which they are already committed (Tetlock, 2002). This implies that moral clarity may be greatest when individuals are in a persuasive or combative mode.

This view is supported by evidence that attitude certainty increases when individuals resist attempts at persuasion (Tormala & Petty, 2002). Conversely, increasing attitude certainty tends to amplify the dominant effects of attitude on judgment, such that univalent attitudes become more resistant to persuasion and ambivalent attitudes less resistant (Clarkson, Tormala, & Dugan, 2008). Thus certainty enables people to see clearly whether their judgments support one or multiple perspectives in a persuasive context. Because explanatory reasoning has a way of reinforcing existing positions, morally oriented conversation promotes honest behavior by clarifying ethical values (Gunia, Wang, Huang, Wang, & Murnighan, 2012).

Time and distance

If folk wisdom is to be believed, people perceive events more clearly with the benefit of time and distance. This view of clarity is supported by evidence from construal level theory demonstrating that people judge immoral actions more harshly, and moral actions more

approvingly, when the actions are psychologically distant (Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008). Distal objects and behaviors are construed more abstractly, such that individuals' evaluations are less susceptible to contextual influence and more reflective of ideological commitments (Ledgerwood, Trope, & Chaiken, 2010). Hence we form moral judgments most clearly when considering events far in the past or future, or when judging people across the divide of continents or social class. Moreover, we apply the moral clarity of distance to our own self-concept, strongly rejecting the representativeness of distant-future behaviors that violate our acknowledged values (Wakslak, Nussbaum, Liberman, & Trope, 2008).

General or Specific Processes

The preceding discussion illustrates that numerous processes influence the sense of clarity people have when making moral judgments. Numerous factors also increase the sense of certainty that people feel when making decisions outside of the domain of morality. This raises the question of whether the process of developing moral clarity differs from the process of developing non-moral forms of clarity or certainty, such as overconfidence in forecasting. It also raises the question of whether the downstream consequences of moral clarity differ from the consequences generated by other forms of clarity.

Antecedents

Little research has examined the antecedents of moral clarity. Wiltermuth and Flynn (2012), however, found that people who possess power also develop a heightened sense of moral clarity and consequently punish others more severely for perceived transgressions than do people who lack power. Moreover, Lammers and Stapel (2009) found that power increases people's reliance on deontological or formalist forms of moral reasoning over teleological or utilitarian

approaches. To the extent that relying on one principle of action increases moral clarity relative to relying on a calculation of situationally dependent costs and benefits, power may increase moral clarity by changing people's approaches to ethical decision-making.

The effects of power on non-moral attitudes parallel the effects of power on moral clarity. Power similarly makes people overconfident of their knowledge of factual matters (Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2012) and leads people to engage in confirmatory information-processing (Fischer, Fischer, Englisch, Aydin, & Frey, 2011), which could cause them to be more certain in all their attitudes, moral and non-moral alike. Factors that strengthen people's attitude certainty, such as perceived consensus, the number of times they have voiced that attitude, and the ease with which they can defend the attitude (for review see Tormala & Rucker, 2007) are also likely to affect the clarity with which people make moral judgments.

Given that the same factors seem to contribute to clarity in moral and non-moral beliefs, one might legitimately ask whether it is possible to be highly certain in moral domains and less certain in other domains. The proposition is entirely untested, but we can imagine people who are not especially confident in their own bases of knowledge, or in their tastes, possessing a strong sense of right and wrong if they see that sense of right and wrong as something that was handed down to them by God or by their parents. Such people would have a high level of moral clarity but relatively little clarity in other judgments.

Consequences

Moral clarity may produce different consequences than does certainty or clarity on non-moral issues. Evidence for this comes from a study by Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis (2005) on moral convictions and the attitudes (i.e., moral mandates) that stem from those convictions. Skitka and colleagues found that convictions on moral issues, on which people would possess

high levels of moral clarity, led people to feel greater antipathy toward individuals who held dissimilar views on those issues than did similar differences in attitudes that were not based on moral issues. To the extent that disagreements based on moral convictions are more deleterious toward cooperativeness and tolerance of others than are disagreements based on non-moral attitudes, it becomes especially important to understand why people come to develop such strong moral attitudes and see moral issues with such (justified or unjustified) clarity.

Innate, Learned, or Both?

A growing body of research suggests that people have an innate sense of right and wrong. Some of the strongest evidence for this claim comes, perhaps oddly, from non-humans. Capuchin monkeys will reject rewards for tasks when their rewards seem inequitable in comparison with the rewards received by other capuchins (Brosnan & de Waal, 2003). Thus species sharing a common ancestry with humans further share a sense of fairness. Human babies as young as 15 months can also detect unfairness when it occurs, as evidenced by the longer gaze they give to experimenters when those experimenters administer unequal portions of food to people compared to when those experimenters administer equal portions (Schmidt & Sommerville, 2011). Infants as young as six months show preferences for pro-social individuals over anti-social individuals (Hamlin, Wynn, & Boom, 2007). Moreover, cross-cultural research has demonstrated that some moral precepts, such as do not harm others, are common across cultures.

The strong evidence that people possess innate moral compasses suggests that some level of moral clarity is probably innate. However, it does not necessarily suggest that moral clarity is entirely innate. A large literature has shown that parents heavily influence the values held by their children (e.g., Lapsley & Power, 2005). By placing high importance on some values and

less importance on others, parents likely also influence the degree of ambiguity children see in various situations regarding those values. They may do so through their direct conversations with their children and through their choices about the environments (e.g., schools, religious institutions) in which their children spend their time. Peers no doubt have effects as well on which values individuals come to hold with a great sense of clarity. Moral clarity on specific issues may therefore have a learned component.

It is similarly possible that parents, teachers, and others could influence moral clarity in individuals across a range of domains and issues by instilling a questioning attitude, such that they train children to question the stances that people take on issues and see the nuances in ethically charged situations. By the same token, parents may encourage moral clarity by encouraging steadfast adherence to some principles.

Once an individual develops a sense of clarity about an issue, that person may become highly unlikely to change their opinion about the issue because, consistent with the confirmation bias (for review see Nickerson, 1998), they may selectively attend to information that supports their view. Additionally, they may be motivated to construe any information about an issue as supportive of their initial position. If these processes occur, moral clarity may be self-reinforcing.

Such processes are particularly likely to occur if people feel like their self-views or core beliefs are threatened (Munro & Ditto, 2007; Munro & Stansbury, 2009). In such instances, people dig in their heels and seek to discredit any information that undermines the views they hold dear (Greenwald, 1980). As such, moral clarity may be particularly self-reinforcing when people's values collide and those who already perceive little ambiguity in the moral matters at hand feel that their views are under threat.

Cultural Influences

The culture surrounding an individual may influence how much of a sense of moral clarity that individual possesses. One way that culture may influence how much ambiguity people perceive is through norms about which behaviors are morally appropriate, which behaviors are morally tolerable, and which behaviors are grounds for moral censure. For example, in some cultures there may be a strong norm against nepotism, whereas in other cultures the practice may be seen as a natural and acceptable extension of loyalty to one's in-group. In cultures in which there is strong social consensus that a behavior is either immoral or moral, people may possess a high sense of moral clarity on the issue (Jones, 1991). When the prevailing societal view is less clear, people may possess less clarity.

Culture may also influence behavior more systematically. Hofstede (1979; 1983) established four dimensions on which cultures can vary: individualism/collectivism, power distance, masculinity/femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. Uncertainty avoidance is the dimension most relevant to moral clarity and is defined as "the extent to which individuals within a culture are made nervous by situations that are unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable, and the extent to which these individuals attempt to avoid such situations by adopting strict codes of behavior and a belief in absolute truth" (Vitell, Nwachukwu, & Barnes, 1993, p. 754). People may possess heightened levels of moral clarity in countries like Germany and Japan, which are characterized by high levels of uncertainty avoidance, relative to people in Singapore and the United Kingdom, which are characterized by low levels of uncertainty avoidance.

The philosophies or religions foundational to a culture may also influence the strength of moral clarity an individual from that culture will possess. In Chinese culture the religions of Taoism and (to a lesser extent) Confucianism feature the yin and the yang, suggesting that two

opposite forces (such as light and dark) are present and necessary for each to exist. These two opposite forces are seen as working not against each other but rather with each other to achieve a perfect balance (e.g., Garrett, 1993). In the graphical representation of yin and yang, there is a drop of yin in the yang and a drop of yang in the yin. Viewed through this lens, actions may be seen as not purely moral or purely immoral but rather some mix of these. We might therefore expect people to exhibit lower levels of moral clarity in cultures in which Taoist and related philosophies are followed. Indeed, scholars have suggested that following such philosophies encourages people to adopt multiple perspectives when analyzing behavior (Johnson, 2000).

Adopting multiple perspectives when analyzing behavior may correlate with people taking a relativistic rather than an absolutistic approach to ethics. People who take a relativistic view would argue that society defines what is moral and immoral and, as societies differ, so too might the meanings of moral and immoral, right and wrong differ across cultures (Forsyth & Berger, 1982). One could legitimately ask whether it is possible to have a strong sense of moral clarity when using relativistic forms of moral judgment. We would posit that one could have a sense of moral clarity using relativistic judgments but that the moral clarity of such judgments would likely stem from one's confidence in the prevailing views of society. Moral clarity using absolute (i.e., invariant) standards of moral judgment is easier to understand, as it would correspond to how sure an individual is that a behavior violates an absolute principle.

Future research could and should determine whether moral clarity differs depending upon the level of uncertainty avoidance in a culture and the degree to which people in that culture espouse dualistic philosophies. We hope that it also further examines what moral clarity looks like when people strongly adhere to using relativistic or culturally specific standards of behavior. Some people worry that certainty of any kind has become the casualty of a postmodern age in

which all beliefs and judgments are considered socially constructed and situationally dependent, but it is equally possible that such firmly relativistic contentions evince their own form of moral clarity.

Conclusion

Throughout our lives we expect and are expected to know right from wrong. Ordinary citizens, prominent figures, and even entire governments are routinely criticized for showing an absence of moral clarity. On the other hand, some people may find overconfidence about moral issues to be narrow-minded or oppressive. Hence moral clarity occupies a unique position in our social environment compared to certainty about factual knowledge or personal preferences. Moral clarity acts as both a motive for individual conduct and a signal in interpersonal relations. Paradoxically, clarity enables us to direct our will yet simultaneously constrains our decisions. Without any clarity whatsoever we would be helpless to choose between all available options, but extreme clarity can restrict the many possibilities for action to a single unequivocal path. Moral clarity may be seen in this light as a valve controlling the flow of judgment and behavior. Investigating the forces that turn this mechanism, and the downstream consequences that follow, will open a new channel to understanding the dynamics of morality.

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