

Levels of moralisation: a new conception of moral sensitivity

Benjamin J. Lovett^{a*} and Alexander H. Jordan^b

^a*Elmira College, USA;* ^b*Dartmouth College, USA*

Moral sensitivity has generally been interpreted in a normative sense, as the ability to notice moral features present in a situation. This paper outlines an alternative, descriptive conception of moral sensitivity: the levels of moralisation model. This model describes four qualitatively distinct levels at which a preference can be held: no moralisation; moralisation for the self; moralisation for others; and public expression of moralisation. Empirical research supporting the existence of these levels as well as processes that move a preference across the levels are discussed. In addition, the practical utility of the model is demonstrated with regard to moral education and conflict resolution programs.

Introduction

Some decisions, generally considered to be moral, are those in which a person ‘ought’ to have a certain preference about how to behave and then ‘ought’ to behave in accordance with that preference. Praise from others is expected if the right alternative is chosen, whereas reproach is risked if the wrong alternative is selected. Other decisions are considered non-moral matters of personal preference.

Operationalising the distinction between moral and non-moral decisions (or preferences) can be difficult, since there is sometimes significant disagreement about whether an issue involves moral concerns (e.g. eating meat) and since some clearly non-moral issues are considered nonetheless to have right and wrong answers, due to concerns of prudence (one *ought not* to run holding scissors), empirical evidence (describing grass as ‘red’ is plainly *wrong*) or conventional definition (the student who sums two and two as ‘five’ is reprimanded and possibly even shamed). Despite these difficulties, many theories of moral development have focused on how children learn to distinguish moral from non-moral issues (e.g. Aronfreed, 1968; Smetana, 1983; Turiel, 1983), and neo-Kohlbergian theorists (Rest, 1983; You & Bebeau, 2005) have investigated *moral sensitivity*, defined as the ability to recognise the presence of moral issues in real-world situations.

*Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, Elmira College, 1 Park Place, Elmira, NY, 14901, USA. Email: blovett@elmira.edu

In this paper, after briefly describing the dominant, normative conception of moral sensitivity and its limitations, we propose a new model of moral sensitivity in which the *moralisation* of an issue—seeing the issue as morally loaded, that is—exists as a sequence of ‘levels’. We argue that adopting this gradation-based descriptive model of moral sensitivity will help advance the practice of moral education and conflict resolution.

Two conceptions of moral sensitivity

The normative conception

The dominant model of moral sensitivity that researchers have worked with is normative in nature. Assessment instruments feature items that have correct and incorrect answers and the criterion for correctness in identifying moral issues in a given situation is often the ethical practice guidelines for a particular profession. For example, Bebeau (1985, 1994) developed the Dental Ethical Sensitivity Test to examine the degree to which dentistry students recognised issues in the context of dental practice that would be construed as morally relevant according to professional codes of ethics in dentistry. Analogous tests have been developed for assessing the moral sensitivity of general healthcare providers (Lützné *et al.*, 1997), marketing researchers (Sparks & Hunt, 1998) and laboratory scientists (Clarkeburn, 2002). Results from such assessments aid in the design of more effective programs for teaching particular professions’ ethical norms to practitioners within those professions.

Despite its applied utility, this conception of moral sensitivity has important limitations. First, research in this tradition has tended to conceive of morality as a set of explicit rules—a cognitive knowledge structure—ignoring the influence of emotional intuitions on moral judgements (e.g. Haidt, 2001; see Walker, 2002, for related criticism). Some researchers working from the cognitive developmental perspective have, however, recently begun to incorporate intuitions into their work. For example, Narvaez’s (1996) paper on moral perception was an early attempt to examine the role of ‘largely unconscious’ (p. 5) processes in moral functioning and Lapsley and Hill’s (2008) more recent discussion of dual-process theories acknowledged the need for ‘a model of moral cognition that articulates both the deliberative *and automatic processes* that underlie moral behaviour’ (p. 315, italics added). Nonetheless, emotions remain under-theorised in this work and the resulting comprehensive models of moral functioning continue to overemphasise conscious processes.

A second, more central, limitation of the normative conception of moral sensitivity is its neglect of everyday-life situations apart from occupational responsibilities. As long as researchers cling to a purely normative conception of moral sensitivity—one in which people are labelled as more or less able to perceive the objective moral properties of particular situations—research will necessarily be limited to professional practice situations, where a formal code of ethics, agreed upon in the profession, can be used to determine the correctness of individuals’ moral perceptions. In everyday life, no such code exists; even legal regulations, which apply to all citizens, famously

fail to reliably track citizens' moral beliefs. Indeed, controversy is practically a distinguishing feature of moral issues, even when that controversy exists between a very small minority and a much larger majority. Particularly in modern pluralist societies, in which there are no consensus moral codes for general living (Durkheim, 1925/1961), there is no way to test the 'correctness' of individuals' everyday moral sensitivity in an objective manner, as required by a normative framework.

It is still possible, however, to *describe* people's perceptions of moral issues in everyday life, without judging these perceptions in terms of correctness. To advance research on moral sensitivity beyond professional ethics, we believe that such a *descriptive* conception of moral sensitivity is exactly what is needed. Of course, the distinction between descriptive and normative models is never complete. In practice, all normative models leave at least some moral questions open, since no such models can address all relevant moral issues. Similarly, even the most descriptive moral psychology must advocate for a particular conception—however primitive—of the moral domain to demarcate the territory it will attend to. Still, the distinction between normative and descriptive conceptions is a useful one.

The descriptive conception

By describing the process through which individuals or cultures come to view issues or behaviour as possessing moral properties—the process of *moralisation*—Rozin (1997) laid the groundwork for a descriptive conception of moral sensitivity. Rozin took no position on whether specific issues or situations actually *do* have moral properties, and this neutrality is a crucial component of the descriptive approach. Although he did not present any original empirical data on particular moral issues and the degree to which various individuals or groups moralise those issues, Rozin described general features of the process of becoming morally sensitive to an issue. For example, moralisation involves recruiting emotions associated with moral judgements (e.g. contempt), moralisation often occurs when behaviour is associated with stigmatised groups, and scientific explanations of behaviour tend to reduce the moralisation of the behaviour.

Another descriptive model of moral sensitivity has been proposed by Skitka and colleagues (e.g. Skitka *et al.*, 2005; Skitka & Morgan, 2009). These investigators have studied the effects of *moral conviction*, a quality of attitudes reflecting someone's core moral values (as reported by participants). As in Rozin's (1997) model, Skitka and colleagues investigate participants' subjective experiences of whether various issues are moral issues, without taking a position on the participants' accuracy. Skitka and colleagues have found that higher levels of moral conviction are associated with, among other things, more intolerance of people holding different attitudes and a willingness to break rules to achieve desired ends related to the attitude's objects. Moreover, these effects were found when the strength of participants' attitudes (e.g. how resistant they are to change; how certain people are in holding them) was controlled for, suggesting that moral conviction is a distinct and important quality of attitudes.

In an effort to specify the objects of moral attitudes more precisely, while staying within a descriptive framework, Haidt and Joseph (2004) argued that humans evolved several distinct cognitive systems that recognise different kinds of moral issues. They pointed to four domains of moral issues—suffering, hierarchy, reciprocity and purity—each of which is associated with distinct emotions and a separate evolutionary challenge. For instance, violations of reciprocity (such as cheating or stealing) are associated with anger, and the recognition of these violations is based on the need to share food. Although this model shows the breadth of people's moralisation, it does not take into account its depth, since it treats moralisation in a binary fashion: either a behaviour is in the moral domain (for a given person) or it is not.

To examine the possibility that moralisation may exist on a number of levels rather than as an all-or-nothing phenomenon, Lovett and Jordan (2005) presented college students with 30 brief vignettes describing choices about to be made (e.g. whether to steal a textbook from a deserted study lounge) and asked them to rate, on a scale from 1 to 5, the degree to which they felt each choice had moral implications. Students used the full scale and showed substantial variability in scores for individual items as well as in the sum of their ratings for the 30 vignettes, suggesting that the moralisation of individual issues and the general tendency to moralise decisions are both continuous variables.

Building on these suggestive findings, in the rest of the present paper we outline a descriptive conception of moral sensitivity that breaks down the moralisation process into four qualitatively distinct stages. We describe research supporting the existence of each of these 'levels' of moralisation, and we argue that adopting this more nuanced conception of moral sensitivity will enrich our understanding of moral education and conflict resolution. This conception, like all descriptive conceptions, remains agnostic about the truth-value of first-order moral propositions (such as 'one should not steal money'). We do not assume or argue for the rightness or wrongness of any behaviour, but instead seek to clarify what it means to hold moral attitudes towards this behaviour and what causes people to hold such attitudes.

Levels of moralisation

The levels of moralisation model of moral sensitivity views moralisation as a special attitude toward a preference—specifically, the degree to which a person thinks it is important for themselves and for others to possess the preference and to act in accordance with it. The essence of moralisation, then, is the investment of ego-resources into a preference, the degree to which a person cares about his or her own preferences. Although this definition usually leads to the inclusion of issues typically thought of as moral issues, as we will see, it also includes other issues. Importantly, it is not restricted to any particular concerns, such as justice, harm or welfare. Although some may find this approach overly inclusive, such inclusiveness has been called for by scholars who emphasise differences in moral issues across cultures and political ideologies (e.g. Shweder *et al.*, 1987; Haidt & Graham, 2007). The present

model posits at least four levels of moralisation and multiple processes that lead a preference to become more or less moralised.

Level 0: simple preferences

Some preferences are not moralised at all. For example, even if John intensely prefers eating blueberries rather than strawberries, it is unlikely that he moralises his preference and scolds people who choose to eat strawberries or thinks that people who prefer blueberries have a better character. Moreover, John would not care if he woke up one day and suddenly his preference had changed. Those preferences that have no moralisation at all may be said to be at Level 0, and most of our preferences appear to be at this level, as part of our domains of ‘personal preference’ or ‘taste’.

Level 0 preferences are typically explained by reference to effects on psychological qualities of the actor. If John is asked why he dislikes strawberries, he is apt to say that he does not enjoy their taste or perhaps that he is disgusted by their taste. Similarly, if Mary is asked why she does not listen to a certain genre of music, she may describe it as making her feel bored. Importantly, some psychological qualities, such as guilt, shame and embarrassment (i.e. the self-conscious emotions: see Tangney, 2001) are *not* typically mentioned to explain Level 0 preferences.

Level 1: preferences with meta-preferences

Level 1 preferences differ from those at Level 0 in one definitive way: they are accompanied by a second-order preference (a meta-preference) to retain (or, occasionally, to eliminate) the preference. As such, they usually can be differentiated from Level 0 preferences in other ways as well: their violation (i.e. not acting in accordance with a Level 1 desire) can lead to guilt, shame or embarrassment, their justification can be based on moral reasons (statements about things that are categorically ‘wrong’), and their place in an individual’s identity is more central and permanent. Moreover, the emotions that they lead to can themselves be judged as ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’ (cf. Lewis, 1944/2001).

At Level 1, preferences are moralised for the self, but not for others. As an example, we might turn to religious individuals who follow rituals but do not expect or necessarily desire that others follow the same rituals; the religious individual may feel bad if prevented from performing the rituals, but would not be angered or saddened by watching others who do not participate. Similarly, someone’s aesthetic preference may be at Level 1, such that the person would be upset if he or she no longer enjoyed a certain author’s books or would experience guilt if attracted to a certain kind of visual art.

In his survey of contemporary Americans’ views on morality, Wolfe (2001) found many examples of Level 1 moralisation, often described as ‘tolerance’. Wolfe noted that after reporting a moral viewpoint, many of his interviewees hastened to add a phrase such as ‘but that’s just me’. Admittedly, Level 1 is a strange level for preferences to be at. Many moral philosophers define the moral domain in terms of

obligations that are universal (e.g. Kant, 1785/1992; see also Turiel, 1983), whereas Level 1 moralisation is explicitly restricted to one's own personal behaviour. Moreover, Level 1 preferences are sometimes justified in ways that would seem to imply a universalisation; consider a woman who would not have an abortion 'because I would feel so guilty' but does not have a preference concerning what other pregnant women choose to do. It is as if Level 1 preferences are not viewed by their bearers as ethical facts, but only as opinions. Recent empirical research suggests that many people regard some, but not all, of their moral attitudes as mere opinions, although individuals who ground their moral beliefs in religion are less likely to adopt this subjectivist stance (Goodwin & Darley, 2008).

Level 2: preferences for others

Level 2 preferences are those typically described as moralistic—we apply them to others and we evaluate others well or poorly depending on whether they act for or against those preferences. If Susan moralises drinking alcohol at Level 2, she will not only feel guilt, shame or embarrassment if she herself drinks, but she will also feel moral emotions such as contempt if she sees others drinking (see Haidt [2003] for a full taxonomy of the moral emotions). However, Susan would not be likely to use these emotions as reasons to justify her preference (as at Level 0); instead she may point to the possible harmful consequences of alcohol or might simply say that drinking it is wrong, unable to give further explanation (cf. Haidt, 2001).

It may seem that the existence of hypocrites—those who shamelessly commit acts that they moralise in others—would call into question the idea that moralising for the self (i.e. Level 1) is generally a 'lower' level of moralisation than moralising for others (i.e. Level 2). But recent research suggests that hypocrisy is the exception rather than the rule. In one series of experiments, participants were asked to imagine being in a variety of situations in which they were tempted to break a rule and to indicate whether they would, in fact, break the rule (Gollwitzer, 2004). Later, these same participants were asked to assign punishments to criminal convicts involved in cases similar to the imaginary situations of temptation. Participants who predicted that they would have broken the rule were more lenient on the convicts than those participants who would not have broken the rule. It seems reasonable, then, to consider Level 2 more inclusive than Level 1 moralisation, since Level 2 moralisation tends to apply to the self as well as to others.

Level 3: publicly expressed preferences for others

Although Level 2 preferences are 'fully' moralised in one sense (i.e. that they apply to everyone), they are not the pinnacle of moralisation because they are kept private. A useful distinction can be made between these silent judgements and Level 3 moralisation, which requires expressing those judgements publicly, often with the intent of modifying transgressors' behaviour. When ethicists refer to 'moralism' (e.g. Fullinwider, 2005), they are typically referring to Level 3 moralisation. Importantly,

Level 3 itself has many degrees of intensity; we are apt to associate it with social activists and religious evangelists, forgetting about the parent who calmly explains her disapproval of her child's actions and the teacher who, when asked, gives her honestly negative opinion of her student's work ethic.

Often Level 3 preferences are felt more intensely than Level 2 preferences, but this is not always the case. Social factors can sometimes determine whether we feel comfortable expressing a preference, and so weak opinions may be voiced in sympathetic company whereas strong opinions may be suppressed when the audience will not be receptive. Social and cultural norms also have a strong impact on the justifications people give for their Level 3 preferences, with explanations tailored to the particular audience one is trying to influence.

Difficult cases

Some preferences do not fit neatly into one of the four classifications outlined above. One such difficult case is voting: on the one hand, voting in a referendum on an issue that affects others' behaviour would appear to be publicly expressing a preference and therefore be at Level 3; on the other hand, voting is a rather indirect way of confronting people about their behaviour and so could be said to be at Level 2. Another difficult case occurs when we have different standards for different groups of people: you may think poorly of your close friends for smoking but not think poorly of other people for smoking; your preference would thus appear to be on the borderline between Level 1 and 2. Furthermore, you may have preferences for your friends' preferences about a particular issue (e.g. you may want them to hate littering), as well as their behaviour, whereas with strangers you may care only about their behaviour (i.e. that they do not actually litter). The existence of these difficult cases suggests that moralisation might be best viewed as existing along a continuum and our proposed four levels are at different points on this continuum.

Movement among the levels: moral escalation and de-escalation

Several processes work to move us among the levels of moralisation on a particular issue. These can be divided into two sets of processes: those of moral escalation, moving us to moralise a preference at a higher level, and those of moral de-escalation, lowering our moralisation of a preference. At a general level, processes of moral escalation all work to make us feel that our preferences are very important and meaningful, based on sturdy, even universal foundations, whereas processes of moral de-escalation undermine the certainty in our opinions, encouraging us to explain our preferences away.

Moral escalation

One way to trigger moral escalation is to increase the individual's sense of authority. People feel more comfortable moralising at higher levels when they believe themselves

to possess special authority in the domain in question. Professional music critics, for example, are more likely to think that their preferences derive from factors inherent in the music, and they are consequently more likely to want to retain their preferences and to judge others by their own preferences. Factors, then, that make someone an authority in a domain lead to higher levels of moralisation. Being around children, being asked one's opinion on something, and having legitimate authority (as that of a teacher, psychotherapist or member of the clergy) may all increase the confidence necessary to moralise at higher levels.

Authority may have its greatest influence in moving individuals from Level 2 to 3 in moralisation, since authority carries with it increased ability (and often responsibility) to make one's opinions known. More generally, power has been associated with an orientation toward action; Galinsky *et al.* (2003) found that students asked to write essays about situations in which they exerted power over others were more likely to later act on their goals in an experimental situation than were students who wrote essays about situations in which others exerted power over them. Applying this finding to moralisation, individuals with higher levels of power may be more likely to presume that their preferences in many domains are simply accurate, correct perceptions and that any disagreement implies objective incorrectness; these individuals would be especially likely to openly judge others' preferences as being right or wrong.

A second factor that escalates moralisation is being surrounded by others who share one's preferences, especially if their shared opinions are voiced explicitly. Such company can push us all the way from Level 0 to 3. Initially, Robert may be at Level 0 with regard to smoking marijuana, perhaps having only an aversion to the taste and odour, without any conviction or even a second-order desire to find marijuana objectionable. But after meeting others who also dislike marijuana, Robert may become reluctant to change his preference and may incorporate an anti-marijuana conviction into his identity (Level 1) and may wonder with his new friends what sort of people could possibly disagree with them (Level 2). When, after a period of bonding with these like-minded individuals, he smells marijuana on his brother's jacket, he may not even hesitate to scold his brother about his behaviour (Level 3). These processes have been studied by social psychologists, who coined the term 'group polarization' for the general phenomenon that when group members agree on something, the average opinion strength of the members increases after discussion (Myers & Lamm, 1976).

Moving from Level 2 to 3 is somewhat different from other transitions in that it involves a move from cognition to behaviour. A sense of authority and a sense of values that are widely shared can certainly play roles in motivating this transition, but when an individual is deciding whether or not to reproach a transgressor, a third variable is also important: the estimated probability of success. As moralists, we concentrate on 'swing voters' who we think we can persuade or otherwise influence, and so successful moralists are good judges of people and situations who carefully decide when to moralise publicly (i.e. at Level 3) and when to fall silent (Lovett, 2005). Public moralisation always carries the risk of eliciting rejection from individuals who

might feel threatened by one's implied moral superiority (cf. Monin *et al.*, 2008), and so this risk must be weighed against the potential benefits of changing others' behaviour.

It should be noted that although moral escalation may be useful in educational practice, the four levels of moralisation are not directed toward a particular endpoint or goal; they are not meant to be teleological. The examples here are meant to illustrate that moral behaviour may be more effectively influenced by preferences held at higher levels of moralisation, but there is no specific goal to which moral escalation is naturally directed and, as will be discussed below, at times moral escalation may be counterproductive.

Moral de-escalation

Often the factors that lead to moral de-escalation are simply opposites of escalating factors; factors that undermine a sense of authority are especially important here. One factor that can undermine authority is hypocrisy: when we have transgressed in the past, we hesitate to moralise in the present. Therefore, the obese mother tempted to moralise about her daughter's overeating at Level 3 may not even be able to think negative thoughts about it and instead stay at Level 1, still feeling guilt about her own transgressions. This sense of hypocrisy is often used as an *ad hominem* attack to diffuse any attempts at moralism; when the moralist criticises their target, the target immediately points to any past transgressions of the moralist. Moreover, we are eager to believe that moralists are not especially ethical in their private lives and pleased when these beliefs are vindicated; tracts against moralism (e.g. Morone, 2003) delight in pointing to even minor imperfections in moralists.

Another cause of moral de-escalation is finding oneself in the minority on an issue. Even when disagreement with others on matters of preference does not encourage people to change their own views, it can still weaken their moralisation of those preferences. Individuals who moralise their preference for religious rituals at Level 1 are often moved to Level 0 when they move away from families and become the only one participating in the ritual; sometimes they lose the preference entirely and discontinue the practice. Individuals who moralise their preference for a political candidate at Level 2 or 3, only to find out that close friends feel differently, may reduce their moralisation level to 1 or even 0, since they would be hard pressed to think poorly about their close friends. Experimental research has borne out these predictions. In one relevant study, Orive (1988) paired up research participants who were generally similar to each other in terms of moral and political opinions, but who disagreed on one specific issue; after discussion with their partners, the participants were substantially less certain in their attitudes towards the issue, less convinced of the importance of the issue and less likely to act on their opinion.

Finally, the mere act of seeing people transgress can cause moral de-escalation. As Durkheim (1925/1961) pointed out, a rule's strength does not derive from the fact that it is followed, but that strength is compromised by its open violation. A recent

set of experiments (Weeks *et al.*, 2005) found that merely exposing business persons to vignettes of various morally dubious business practices affected their judgements of the practices years later. We generally assume an inverse relationship between the severity and the frequency of a transgression, and so those individuals who moralise their negative attitude toward, for example, gambling may find their preference less moralised after instruction in the frequency of gambling behaviour, even if their negative attitude remains.

Applications of the model

Moral education: escalation put to work

Moral education has long been viewed as emphasising the formation and maintenance of proper preferences, at least since Aristotle (1941 edn) observed that education teaches the child to like and dislike what is actually good and bad. Although the propriety of inculcating preferences is more controversial today, all sides in the debate agree that schools cannot avoid influencing children's habits and preferences (see Arthur, 2003). A gradation-based descriptive conception of moralisation—as advocated in the present paper—suggests that in addition to attending to the way that preferences can change in their content (e.g. from liking cheating to disliking cheating), researchers must examine the subtle ways that a particular preference can change over time in its level of moralisation. Moral educators might harness processes of moral escalation to give students' preferences the tenacity and strength that Level 0 preferences lack.

For example, the child who dislikes cheating on tests has the desirable Level 0 preference, but may, under temptation, change her preference, at least for the moment. Alternatively, at Level 1, she would feel guilty for cheating, and the anticipation of guilt can be an effective inhibitor of immoral behaviour (Hoffman, 2000). At Level 2, that preference would be accompanied by a negative judgement of others who cheat, and at Level 3, the student would advise others against cheating, perhaps even reporting those who do cheat. Clearly, it is not always desirable to have students with preferences at Level 3 or even Level 2, but this is a decision that the teacher will make, depending on the issue and preference in question.

To move preferences to higher levels of moralisation, teachers can use moral escalation processes. For example, group discussions of vignettes—at least when widespread agreement is expected—can result in the polarisation described earlier, giving students more confidence in their moral views. Consider a class discussion of discrimination against individuals with disabilities. Each student who has already been taught, by parents or prior teachers, that such discrimination is wrong shares his or her opinions and provides examples of unethical, discriminatory behaviour as well as more appropriate behaviour toward those with disabilities. Upon hearing others echo these sentiments, the students grow more confident in their beliefs and develop a more general sense in their own authority as people who have appropriate moral intuitions. These features escalate their moralisation of the issue of fair and

compassionate treatment of individuals with disabilities, increasing their willingness to judge others on this point.

Narratives and other stories can also lead to moral escalation, stimulating students to make their preferences more central in their identity (Vitz, 1990). For instance, a teacher seeking to stimulate moralisation of alcohol abuse might provide students with a magazine article detailing the actual consequences of alcohol abuse as experienced by a real family. Such a vivid, narrative account can help students to experience the moral emotions associated with higher levels of moralisation: sympathy for the victims of a father who hurts his children when inebriated, or anger at the carelessness of a teenager who drinks a substantial amount of alcohol at a party before offering to drive her friends home. These moral emotions lead students to perceive their preference against alcohol abuse as more than *just* a (Level 0) preference.

Finally, open discussions of immorality, pointing to villains as well as heroes, and emphasising those personality traits (e.g. lack of empathy) that often characterise those who have acted immorally, can escalate students' preferences to Level 2 or 3. Consider a discussion in a primary school classroom concerning common actions that hurt the environment (e.g. wasting energy, careless littering, failing to recycle). A teacher who offers her own condemnation of these behaviours models moral judgement of other people's actions, licensing her students to do the same, both privately (at Level 2) and publicly (at Level 3). The teacher can also model empathy for those hurt by the immoral actions (in this case, future generations) and such empathy can recruit moral emotions such as anger (Hoffman, 2000). Of course, such discussion of 'moral villains' should be judicious, and students should be shown the social and structural factors that influence unethical behaviour, rather than immediately attributing such behaviour to evil motives.

Conflict resolution: applying de-escalation strategies

Though higher levels of moralisation are sometimes desirable, the potential downsides of moralisation include a reduced ability to take the perspective of the other side and a fear of not being true to oneself if one's opinion changes (due to new information or other influence). Research supports the idea that preferences held at higher levels of moralisation are more resistant to change, since highly-moralised 'protected values' (Baron & Spranca, 1997) are not open to negotiation; Fiske and Tetlock (1997) found that participants condemned decision makers who even considered making trade-offs involving these protected values. Moreover, as Skitka and Morgan (2009) note with regard to a related construct, higher levels of moral conviction are associated with intolerance, a lack of interest in pragmatic compromises, and a generalised defiance toward those who do not uphold the convictions.

A second area of application for moral educators, then, is the resolution of conflicts between students, as well as conflicts between students and teachers. When two individuals disagree on preferences, and that disagreement is keeping both from reaching an important goal, moralisation of those preferences can further impede any attempts at negotiation and de-escalation procedures may prove helpful. These disagreements

are important opportunities for teachers to help influence students' moral development (e.g. Heydenberk *et al.*, 2003), and the moralisation scheme presented here suggests principles for doing this.

Many common conflict resolution strategies can be framed in terms of their de-escalating effects on moralisation. For instance, the recommendation to focus on coordinating the interests that different parties have rather than compromising the official positions that different parties hold (e.g. Fisher *et al.*, 1991) emphasises a pragmatic perspective in which everything is negotiable and people's preferences are taken as merely that—preferences—rather than as values to be defended. Consider a conflict at a secondary school arising during the planning of an important student social event, such as a dance. School officials and students may disagree over policies such as whether students may bring guests who are not enrolled in the same school. Both groups may view their positions as containing moral imperatives: the school officials view student safety and security as paramount and as compromised by the invitation of outside guests, whereas the students view the school as denying legitimacy to the romantic or other relationships they have with other adolescents who simply do not attend the same school. A successful conflict resolution may involve asking both groups to formulate a list of their goals—that is, what each group would like to get out of the dance. Phrased in this way, one or both groups may be more willing to compromise, either on their goals or on the way of achieving them.

A related strategy, sharing 'feelings' in addition to 'perceptions' in the conflict resolution process (Bodine & Crawford, 1998) helps to make clear that the bases for disagreement are often affective and somewhat subjective (to 'feel' something does not imply the achievement and accuracy of 'perceiving' something). For instance, a conflict between two boys arising when one believes that the other has insulted him is unlikely to be resolved so long as one claims to have been insulted and the other denies insulting the first. If, instead, one boy describes his own feelings (e.g. sadness, anger, shame) arising from the exchange, the feelings cannot be denied and must be acknowledged; the second boy is prompted to respond in a constructive way and the first then feels as though he has been heard.

Finally, the frequently noted need to humanise those with whom one disagrees (e.g. Halpern & Weinstein, 2004) keeps those who hold minority views from being able to dismiss all who disagree as not worth engaging, which can lead to humility (a lessened sense of authority) and thus moral de-escalation of one's preferences. Consider a heated conflict between students who support different candidates for political office, at the time of a national election. Teachers in a secondary school may encourage students' interest in the political process, but interest can turn to passionate advocacy, which can generate conflict when different students advocate for different politicians and policies. Teachers should note that reasonable, intelligent people often disagree on political issues, even when they share the same basic moral values. Moreover, students should be encouraged to get to know individual students with whom they disagree, to emphasise personal similarities and to help to dissociate moral character from political preferences.

Future directions and conclusion

Although much existing empirical research appears to support some aspects of the levels of moralisation model, other aspects remain to be submitted to empirical test. Especially needed research includes systematic explorations of Level 1 moralisation, work on the relationship between level of moralisation and other features of attitudes (e.g. certainty, resistance to change), and investigations of experimental manipulations' effects on moral escalation and de-escalation. Applied tests of the utility of the model in the contexts of moral education and conflict resolution would also be helpful, although in applying the levels of moralisation model of moral sensitivity, we must be mindful of the benefits and the costs of moral escalation and de-escalation.

Moralisation should be viewed as pervasive, in that we frequently view our preferences as having some degree of objective correctness, even if only with regard to our own behaviour. The levels of moralisation model presented here is an attempt at acknowledging this pervasiveness, while also avoiding the kinds of *a priori* judgements about correctness that normative models of moral sensitivity include. Although much work remains to be done, we hope that the levels of moralisation model will prompt such work, leading to an account of moral sensitivity that is faithful to everyday life experiences of morality.

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