

PHIL 480: Seminar in the History of Philosophy
Building Moral Character: Neo-Confucianism and Moral Psychology

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[Handout #6]

Augusto Blasi, Moral Cognition and Moral Action: A Theoretical Perspective

§ Main Goals

- **To propose a theoretical model, the Self Model, as an explanation for the relations between moral cognition and moral action. → Moral action is a direct result of a judgment about the self.**
- **To present two other cognitivist models – those of Piaget and Haan – and shows how the Self Model is an improvement of the two.**
- **The self is not just a collection of traits, attitudes, or percepts, but refers to the way these characteristics are ordered and organized and to that narrow area of functioning that is apprehended as “deep,” “central,” and essential.**

§ The Self Model

Key Theses of the Self Model:

1. Moral reasons are functionally related to action.
2. Cognitive motivation is *necessary* for any cognitive account of morality.
3. The central function of human cognition is the appraisal of truth.
4. It acknowledges a basic duality of motivation, but stresses the normative pull of cognitive motivation.
5. The self is the central explanatory concept, establishing both the sense of personal responsibility and the dynamism of self-consistency.
6. The self is developmental.

Background skepticism:

- ___ skepticism about the notion of a unified or integrated self
- ___ postmodernism: the dissolution of character
- ___ modernity is characterized by a fragmentation of self-conceptions
- ___ the modern self is saturated by the conflicting demands of multiple social roles and is thereby reduced to “no self at all.”

§ Reason and Morality – A Cognitivist Approach

1. The consistency between what one believes to be moral and the way one behaves is, at the same time, a central feature of being moral and an important indicator of human rationality.
2. Moral judgment and moral action form an ideal functional unity.

3. Personal consistency – the correspondence between knowledge and action in the area of morality and its special importance for the individual.
4. Cognitive theories, particularly cognitive developmentalism, understand cognition mainly as structures of knowledge and attribute to it a determining role, in both senses of the term determination: knowledge defines, first, which actions should be considered as morally relevant; second, it genuinely *motivates* people to act according to their moral definitions.

Cognitive Developmentalism	Non-Cognitive Theory
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Moral judgment and moral action form an ideal functional unity 2. Knowledge defines, first, which actions should be considered as morally relevant; second, it genuinely <i>motivates</i> people to act according to their moral definitions. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There are in each person a number of generalized action tendencies (habits, traits, superego components, etc.) leading, under certain conditions, to a variety of moral behaviors. 2. Which action is ultimately performed depends on the relative strength of the tendencies and on their interplay. 3. Moral reasons are either unrelated to action or they are rationalizations, a response to the need of giving oneself a coherent, a face-saving, or a self-protecting account of actions already performed.

§ Moral Reasons as Motives for Action

___ Rational beliefs can become reasons for action, precisely because they are considered to be true by the agent.

What Cognitivists do not say:

1. It is not implied that reasons or cognitive motives are the only motives to perform actions in the moral domain, nor that reasons will necessarily lead to action.
2. In fact, the Self Model of moral action assumes that different motives may be simultaneously present and that reasons may be defeated by the power of other motives.
3. Noncognitive motives do not eliminate the motivational nature of reasons, even when they inhibit their effectiveness.
4. Finally, it is not implied that the reasons one gives are always the real motives by which one's behavior is determined.

§ Cognitive Motivation and Moral Behavior

Cognitive motivation = the power of knowledge to motivate behavior

morally relevant behavior = behavior which is preceded by moral judgment, whether or not it corresponds to the judgment;

morally positive behavior = behavior that corresponds to the agent's moral judgment and is performed *because* the agent understands it to be morally good.

§ Blasi's Self Model of Moral Functioning

Main Theses:

Proposition 1: Situational – Moral actions are responses to situations, as defined by and as interpreted according to moral reasoning structures, i.e., to a set of criteria determining the morally good.

Proposition 2: Concrete Decisions – Moral action directly depends on the moral choice, i.e., on the content of moral judgment. The structures or the criteria of moral reasoning may be indirectly related to the probability that certain specific behaviors will or will not occur.

Proposition 3: Responsibility – Moral judgments, before leading to action, are at times processed through a second set of rules or criteria, the criteria of responsibility. The function of a responsibility judgment is to determine to what extent that which is morally good is also strictly necessary for oneself.

Proposition 4: Obligation – The general criteria used to arrive at responsibility judgments differ from person to person and are related to one's self-definition or to the organization of the self.

Proposition 5: Self-consistency – The transition from a judgment of responsibility to action is supported dynamically by the tendency toward self-consistency, a central tendency in personality organization.

___ Self-consistency is the most important motivational spring.

Proposition 6: Defense mechanisms – Consistency between moral judgment and action will be higher in the degree that the individual has attitudes and strategies to deal with interferences from conflicting needs.

Proposition 7: Guilt – Following an action inconsistent with one's judgment of responsibility, guilt is experienced as an emotional response to the inconsistency within the self.

§ Conclusion

1. Cognitivism:

___ The central moral issue concerns one's responsibility in knowing and in using knowledge.

___ The core of immorality is not wanting to know, blinding oneself, acting against one's knowledge.

The ultimate sin, if one can use in this context an old fashioned and unscientific term, is the sin against the light and the spirit.

2. Knowledge and Responsibility

Integrity is a responsible actualization of what one knows to be right and true. Here, the ideal guiding role of cognitive moral structures is stressed; its effect on action, however, is not thought to be automatic but a free determination of a self that, in regulating the various needs and demands, is sensitive to the supremacy of truth.

3. The moral self:

___ The self is not just a collection of traits, attitudes, or percepts, but refers to the way these characteristics are ordered and organized and to that narrow area of functioning that is apprehended as "deep," "central," and essential.

___ The self is relevant to morality in two ways: being moral, behaving morally, may or may not be a part of the essential self; moreover, for different people different moral aspects (e.g., compassion, love, obedience, justice) may characterize the self.

Reasoning is cheap and painless; action and integrity are not. Integrity requires the development of the whole person; a concern with it tends to emphasize one's failures more than one's successes.