

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

**Spring 2013**

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**[Handout #7]**

**Lapsley & Narvaez, A Social-Cognitive Approach to the Moral Personality**

**§ Main Goals**

1. To develop powerful models of moral psychology that is built on the notions of moral personality, selfhood and identity.
2. To argue that social-cognitive theory provides important insights on moral functioning.
3. To suggest that if virtue as traits is problematic, then we need to reconceptualize dispositional features of human behavior – not as *having* certain traits, but as *doing*.
4. To advocate a different conception of personality, according to which personality is an integrated cognitive-affective system, not separated into moral cognition and moral emotions.
5. To apply this social-cognitive model of personality to *moral* personality.

**§ Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development:**

\_\_\_ Our moral sense is cultivated (mostly through education of parents and teachers), not innate.

\_\_\_ Differences in moral judgment stem primarily from internal differences between people.

\_\_\_ Different people accomplish different levels, and the majority of adults do not reach level three (post-conventional).

\_\_\_ One cannot jump stages, and one cannot comprehend more than a stage higher than one's own stage.

\_\_\_ The purpose of presenting moral dilemmas is to test one's moral reasoning, thereby developing one's moral sense. What one does at the moment does not help one advance on moral levels. (It is important to present them with moral dilemmas for discussion which would help them see the reasonableness of a "higher stage" morality and encourage their development in that direction.)

**The stages:**

**Level One: Preconventional (age 4 - 10)**

**(1) punishment and obedience**

**(2) self-gratification (egoistic principle)**

**Level Two: Conventional (age 10 - 13)**

**(3) approval of others (good boy/nice girl)**

**(4) law and order (our existing laws are absolute)**

**Level Three: Postconventional (adolescence - adulthood)**

- (5) social contract (respect for socially determined standards of individual rights, e.g. U.S. Constitution; understanding of social mutuality and a genuine interest in the welfare of others.)**
- (6) universal ethical principles (abstract concepts of justice, human rights, human dignity and equality); laws are sometimes too arbitrary to be obeyed; morality demands individual conscience.**

**§ Kohlberg's Stage Theory and His View on Virtue Ethics**

1. Justice reasoning at the highest stages made possible a set of procedures that could generate consensus about a hard case moral quandary.
2. Conceptions of virtue are widely relative to individual perspectives. One person's virtue may be someone else's vice: honesty – stubbornness; honesty – insensitivity to others' feelings.
3. Therefore, virtue ethics cannot defeat moral relativism.
4. Stage theory ends with universal ethical principles, and can provide a defense against relativism.

**Problems with Kohlberg's Cognitive Developmental Approach:**

1. It neglects virtue and character, hence has little to say to parents who are concerned to raise children of a particular kind.
2. It does not have a robust sense of the self. And we know that moral personality, selfhood and identity are essential to moral psychology.

**§ Social-Cognitive Theory's Key Concepts**

**I. Coherence of Personality**

1. Personality is coherent, but coherence should not be reduced to mere stability of behavior across time and setting.
2. Coherence is evident in the dynamic, reciprocal interaction among the dispositions, interests, capacities, and potentialities of the agent and the changing contexts of learning, socialization and development.
3. Persons and contexts are not static, orthogonal effects, but they are instead dynamically interacting. Changes on one side of the interaction invariably induce a cascade of consequences on the other side. Both are mutually implicative in accounting for behavior.
4. There is an inextricable union of person and context. We must look for the intra-individual stability and personality coherence at the point of transaction between person and context.
5. Patterns of individual differences arise because people have stable goal systems that structure the organization of the cognitive-affective system and

influence the perception, selection and interpretation of various contextual settings.

## II. Virtue Traits – the *Having* versus the *Doing*

Traditional Conception of Virtue Traits: <i>Having</i>	Social-Cognitive Theory's Conception of Virtue Traits: <i>Doing</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Personality is understood to be the sum of traits that one has, and there are individual differences in the distribution of these traits.</li> <li>2. A person of good moral character is one who is in possession of certain traits that are deemed virtues, whereas a person of poor moral character is in possession of other kinds of traits that are not considered virtues.</li> <li>3. One's traits constitute one's personality, on display across disparate contextual settings.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. This approach emphasizes what people do when they construe their social landscape and how they transform and interpret it in accordance with social-cognitive mechanism.</li> <li>2. Three key social-cognitive mechanisms:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) <b>Schemas:</b> organized knowledge structure that channel and filter social perceptions and memory</li> <li>(ii) <b>Tasks:</b> culturally prescribed demands of social life that we transform or construe as personal goals</li> <li>(iii) <b>Strategies:</b> ways to bring life tasks to fruition.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

## III. Accessibility

1. Accessibility = the activation potential of available knowledge.
2. Frequently activated constructs should be, over time, chronically accessible for purposes of social information processing.
3. The accessibility of a construct emerges from a developmental history of frequent and consistent experience with a specific domain of social behavior.
4. Consequently, individual differences in construct accessibility emerge because of each person's unique social developmental history.

## IV. Moral Expertise

1. If schemas are chronically accessible, then they direct our attention to certain features of our experience at the expense of others.
2. If schemas are chronically salient in memory, then compatible life tasks, goals or settings are more likely to be selected or sought, which in turn serve to maintain dispositional tendencies. E.g. risk-adverse, shyness (Cantor 1990)
3. Experts possess procedural knowledge that has a high degree of automaticity.

## § The Social-Cognitive Theory of Moral Personality

1. Moral personality is better understood in terms of the chronic accessibility of moral schemas for constructing social events. A moral person is one for whom moral constructs are chronically accessible and easily activated for social information processing.
2. Moral categories (schemas, episodes, scripts, prototypes) that are essential, central and important for one's self-identity would also be ones that are chronically accessible for interpreting the social landscape.
3. Once activated, these constructs would dispose the individual to interpret these events in light of his or her moral commitments.
4. Accessible moral knowledge structures influence *what we see* in our interpersonal landscape.
5. At least some morally relevant information processing is implicit, tacit and automatic. – There is *automaticity of everyday life* supported by evidence.
6. Nonconscious mental systems direct self-regulation, and evaluations, social perceptions, judgment, social interactions, and internal goal structures are similarly operative without conscious intention or acts of will.
7. Cognition  $\neq$  conscious cognition. The ability to exercise conscious, intentional control is actually quite limited. We are not normally engaged in active planning, selecting, choosing or interpreting when processing information.
8. Many of our moral performances take place without explicit awareness. Many of our responses are unreflective, highly automatized, and not the result of deliberate decision-making procedures.
9. Moral knowledge is a form of *knowing how* – a procedural knowledge. It is implicit, procedural, scripted and automatic. There is a kind of moral behavior that is coherent, organized, and rule-governed without being based on explicit rules or without being the result of an agonizing, deliberate decision-making calculus.

### Application:

1. Parental interrogatories help children organize events into personally relevant autobiographical memories, which provide part of the self-narrative, action-guiding scripts that become over-learned, frequently practices, routine, habitual and automatic.
2. In these shared dialogues the child learns important lessons about emotions, relationships, and morality.
3. The child is likely to incorporate the parent's moral evaluations, emotional influences, dispositional attributions to the child and other features of the adult's interpretation of the situations being recounted.
4. In this way, parents help children identify morally relevant features of their experience and encourage the formation of social-cognitive schemas that are easily primed, easily activated, and chronically accessible.

**Q: Does this theory resolve the problem of moral relativism that we saw in Blasi and virtue ethics as Kohlberg points out?**