

Whither the Preconventional Child? Toward a Life-Span Moral Development Theory

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ABSTRACT—*A vigorous research literature focused on early childhood conscience, prosocial behavior, and empathy—and also theory of mind, emotion understanding, and social cognition—has important implications for moral development theory. It offers a new understanding of the early conceptual, affective, and relational foundations of moral development. In addition, it provides the opportunity to create a genuinely life-span theory of moral development when it is considered together with the research literatures on moral character, identity, and judgment at older ages. The purpose of this article is to summarize current research on the early foundations of moral development, highlighting how it compares with earlier formulations and describing its implications for constructing a life-span moral development theory to guide future research.*

KEYWORDS—*conscience; moral development; Kohlberg; prosocial motivation; empathy; moral character; social conscience; moral self*

Moral development theorists a generation ago sought to create a life-span portrayal of the growth of moral values, character, and behavior. This aspiration was realized most significantly in Kohlberg's (1969, 1971) theory of the development of moral judgment and in related cognitive-developmental formulations (see Lapsley, 2006). With the declining influence of structural-stage models in the years that followed, arising in part from the growth of domain-specific thinking in many areas of developmental study, moral development researchers have been devot-

ing their attention to more specific issues, such as children's knowledge of values and rights, the socialization of moral behavior, the development of moral personality, and character education (see contributors to Killen & Smetana, 2006).

At the same time, a rich research literature on early childhood has also emerged with important implications for moral development theory. This literature concerns the development of conscience, prosocial behavior, and empathy, as well as theory of mind, growth of social cognition, and emotion understanding, which together profile young children's developing sensitivity to others and its enlistment into their understanding of values. There are two implications of this literature for moral development theory. First, it provides an understanding of the variety of early-emerging conceptual, relational, and affective foundations for developing moral sensibility, and frames new questions about how subsequent achievements in morality build on these early developments. Second, when this literature is considered together with other research of the post-Kohlbergian era, it offers a renewed opportunity to begin constructing a life-span moral development theory to guide future thinking and research. The purpose of this article is to draw attention to these studies and their implications for the construction of such a life-span theory.

DEVELOPING MORAL SENSIBILITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Theory of Mind, Emotion Understanding, and Developing Moral Awareness

During the past two decades, research on theory of mind has reshaped understanding of cognitive growth in early childhood, with important implications for social-cognitive development (see Gelman & Banaji, in press). Because theory of mind research addresses the development of young children's understanding of the intentions, goals, and emotions of people and the ways those mental states are affected by others' actions, this literature is also relevant to moral development.

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Consider the findings of Warneken and Tomasello (2006, 2007), who showed in a series of laboratory probes that 18-month-olds would help an unfamiliar experimenter when the adult's need for assistance was clear and the toddlers knew how to provide help. Toddlers helped significantly less frequently when the adult's need for aid was not apparent in the adult's behavior. These young children were not only discriminating in their assistance based on explicit cues of need but they also helped an unfamiliar adult in the absence of maternal support and formal or informal rewards for doing so (Warneken & Tomasello, 2008).

Developmental researchers have long known that young children can act prosocially (Hay & Cook, 2007; Rheingold, Hay, & West, 1976), but the Warneken and Tomasello (2006, 2007) studies are part of a research program demonstrating young children's broader capacities for shared intentionality with another person (Tomasello, 2007; Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005). Together with research on joint attention, pointing, and collaborative problem solving, these studies indicate that toddlers are sensitive to the goals and intentions underlying others' behavior, that they can try to alter those intentions to achieve their purposes, and that they also can enter into those intentional states in helpful and cooperative acts during the 2nd year. Even when another's goals and desires are very different from their own (Repacholi & Gopnik, 1997), toddlers often help others accomplish their goals without external incentives for doing so. There is considerable experimental evidence that, beginning in the 1st year, infants can appropriately infer others' intentions from observing their behavior (Meltzoff, 2007; Woodward, 2009). It is reasonable, therefore, to conjecture that this early sensitivity to the goals underlying observed behavior provides a conceptual foundation for infants' responding constructively to others' intentions later in the 2nd year.

Is there any evidence that early sensitivity to others' intentions is morally relevant? It is difficult to adduce pertinent evidence with infants and toddlers. But in one study, 3-year-olds had to choose to offer assistance either to a neutral adult or to an adult with harmful intentions toward another person. The children were significantly less likely to offer assistance to the harmful adult, even when the adult's intention to harm the other person failed (Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2010). In another study, 3- and 4-year-olds enlisted a story character's intentions when judging her naughtiness for violating her mother's prohibition (Nunez & Harris, 1998). These studies suggest that in addition to enabling young children to perceive and share the goals of others, advances in their understanding of intentionality become incorporated into more discriminating judgments of moral culpability that encompass intention as well as outcomes (see Wellman & Miller, 2008).

Early achievements in theory of mind may provide the social-cognitive foundations for distinguishing between issues in the moral domain and those in the domains of social convention or personal conduct. By 3–4 years of age, young children view

moral violations as more serious and less revocable than violations of other domain rules, justifying their judgments in terms of unfairness and the harm to others entailed in moral violations (Nucci & Weber, 1995; Smetana, 1981). Young children also have achieved sufficient understanding of the associations between desires and emotions that they can readily comprehend the connections between actions toward another that thwart the person's desires or goals and the resulting negative emotions that the person expresses (Wellman & Banerjee, 1991; Wellman & Lagattuta, 2000).

Similar social-cognitive processes contribute to the emotional sensitivity underlying prosocial moral reasoning in young children. A substantial number of preschoolers reason about prosocial dilemmas with reference to the feelings and needs of the recipient of help (Eisenberg, Lennon, & Roth, 1983; Eisenberg-Berg & Hand, 1979). Kochanska and Murray (2000) have also reported high rates of prosocial reasoning of this kind in their assessments of moral cognition in 4- to 5-year-olds.

Early capacities for empathic or sympathetic responding to others' distress are also important (Eisenberg, Eggum, & Edwards, 2010; Hoffman, 2000). Empathy is morally relevant in that it enhances the salience of another's emotional experience and, in circumstances of moral culpability, contributes to young children's comprehension that another person, or the self, is responsible for someone's distress (Thompson & Hoffman, 1980; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992). Empathic and sympathetic responses are also important for prosocial motivation, especially as children begin to comprehend the associations between another's distress and the actions that may contribute to its remediation (Knafo, Zahn-Waxler, Van Hulle, Robinson, & Rhee, 2008; Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010).

Taken together, early advances in theory of mind provide young children with cognitive resources that help them comprehend the importance of intentions and the emotional consequences of violations of prohibitive morality and also motivate constructive actions that are consistent with prosocial morality. The studies discussed here suggest that some of the significant conceptual foundations for moral judgment and reasoning emerge much earlier than previously assumed, and may provide a basis for later concepts of fairness, responsibility, and other moral evaluations (Wainryb, 2006).

Developing Conscience and Parent-Child Relationships

The research on prosocial behavior and developing theory of mind argues for the early developing affective and cognitive foundations of moral understanding. Studies of conscience development underscore its cooperative and humanistic relational foundations.

In the research of Kochanska and others, conscience is measured in several ways, including young children's unsupervised compliance with a behavioral standard, cooperation with caregivers, moral affect, and moral reasoning (involving simplified

semiprojective moral dilemmas; Kochanska & Aksan, 2004, 2006; see Thompson, Meyer, & McGinley, 2006, for a review). Many of these measures are comparable to those that have been used for years with older children. Conscience can be assessed as early as the 3rd year, and, with increasing age, children exhibit greater comprehension of behavioral standards, enhanced internal control for complying with behavioral expectations, and greater self-initiated discomfort following transgression (see Thompson et al., 2006).

Conscience development is influenced by temperament (especially the growth of effortful control) and the quality of the parent-child relationship (Kochanska & Aksan, 2006). The development of warm, responsive relationships with caregivers is believed to motivate young children to respond cooperatively and positively to the caregivers' socialization initiatives. This conclusion is consistent with attachment theory, which argues that secure attachments are important for early socialization and the development of sensitivity to others' feelings (Waters, Kondo-Ikemura, Posada, & Richters, 1991). In several studies, measures of this mutually responsive relationship—including assessments of maternal responsiveness and shared positive affect between parent and child—have been found to predict multiple measures of conscience throughout the preschool years and into middle childhood (see, e.g., Kochanska, Forman, Aksan, & Dunbar, 2005; Kochanska, Koenig, Barry, Kim, & Yoon, 2010; see Kochanska, 2002a, for a review). A secure parent-child attachment is also associated with enhanced conscience development (Kochanska, 1995; Laible & Thompson, 2000).

Conscience researchers have also investigated other relational influences on moral socialization. Laible and Thompson (2000), for example, examined the role of mother-child discourse by recording conversations between 4-year-olds and their mothers about recent past events in which the child had either misbehaved or behaved properly. They found that children whose mothers more frequently discussed people's feelings in these conversations were, according to independent assessments, more advanced in conscience development. These findings were replicated in a prospective longitudinal study by Laible and Thompson (2002). In both studies, although maternal references to rules and the consequences of violating them were also coded, only maternal references to emotions predicted conscience in young children, consistent with other research underscoring young children's sensitivity to others' feelings in their moral responses (see also Dunn, Brown, & Maguire, 1995).

These studies indicate that conscience development has multifaceted relational influences, including the incentives of a mutually cooperative parent-child relationship and conversational discourse focused on the emotional consequences of children's conduct. This conclusion resembles those of Hoffman and others who have, for many years, emphasized moral socialization in the context of rational, inductive discourse in the discipline encounter (e.g., Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Hoffman, 1970).

Conscience research advances this work in at least two ways. First, it focuses on the influence of reasoning and victim-focused inductions at a much earlier age, and in contexts independent of discipline encounters (e.g., conversations concerning past events). Second, it supplements a traditional emphasis on parental authority with a stronger focus on the relational incentives afforded by a warm parent-child relationship and on the integration of motivational, affective, and cognitive influences that affect young children's comprehension of behavioral standards in relation to their human consequences.

Moral Self

The early years also witness the initial incorporation of moral sensitivity into self-understanding, advancing ideas about the moral self proposed by Emde (e.g., Emde, Biringen, Clyman, & Oppenheim, 1991). Researchers are increasingly using structured interview procedures, adapted from Eder (1990), to elicit young children's understanding of their own psychological characteristics. Many studies have shown that 4- and 5-year-olds can coherently and reliably describe themselves in terms of their dominant affect, tendency toward shyness, positive or negative self-concept, and other characteristics in ways that are consistent with maternal reports of these characteristics (e.g., Goodvin, Meyer, Thompson, & Hayes, 2008; Marsh, Ellis, & Craven, 2002; Measelle, Ablow, Cowan, & Cowan, 1998).

Kochanska and colleagues adapted this procedure to probe 5-year-olds' "moral selves" by presenting children with puppets whose self-descriptions anchor opposite ends of a series of moral characteristics (e.g., "When I break something, I try to hide it so no one finds out" and "When I break something, I tell someone about it right away"). Children then indicate which puppet they most resemble. The characteristics assessed in this interview include children's self-awareness of behaviors associated with moral conduct (e.g., apology, spontaneously confessing wrongdoing, attempting reparation), moral affect (e.g., empathy, discomfort after transgression), moral motivation (e.g., internalized conduct), and other characteristics (Kochanska, 2002b; Kochanska et al., 2010). In a recent longitudinal study, individual differences in young children's moral self-awareness were predicted by preschool conscience measures and, in turn, predicted school-age measures of moral conduct (Kochanska et al., 2010). These findings suggest that a consciously perceived moral self may mediate early and later aspects of moral development in ways that anticipate the development of moral identity (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009).

Social Conscience

Finally, there is evidence that young children begin understanding moral responsibility within broader social contexts than the family, making discriminating moral judgments based on their expanding conception of relationships and social associations. Olson and Spelke (2008), for example, found that 3½-year-olds were more likely to share resources with

family and friends than with strangers, to reciprocate acts of giving that they had experienced, and to reward those who gave to others, consistent with the findings of Vaish et al. (2010) with 3-year-olds. Preschoolers also judge peer-group exclusion based on gender to be unfair (Killen, 2007; Killen, Pisacane, Lee-Kim, & Ardila-Rey, 2001).

These findings suggest that in early childhood, a broadening “social conscience” is emerging by which young children perceive themselves in terms of multiple relationships and social groups. Their moral judgments often reveal a complex balance between self-interested motives and recognition of the needs and deservingness of others. Cultural values are likely to be important in how children conceptualize the mutual obligations entailed in different relationships and the responsibilities involved in their social identities (see, e.g., Killen & Rutland, 2011; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009).

CONSTRUCTING A LIFE-SPAN MORAL DEVELOPMENT THEORY

There are other conceptual achievements of early childhood that are relevant to developing moral understanding, including the influence of time perspective on moral reasoning (Lagattuta, 2005, 2008), the effects of false-belief understanding on moral judgments (Killen, Mulvey, Richardson, Jampol, & Woodward, 2011), and other cognitive advances. Indeed, the early childhood foundations of moral understanding are emerging as an important and increasingly vigorous area of research.

The resulting portrayal of the young child as a moral being is, obviously, strikingly different from the portrayal offered by earlier moral development theories, such as those of Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1969, 1971). By contrast with the depiction of an egocentric, premoral young child, for example, current research shows that developments in theory of mind equip very young children with a nonegocentric awareness of the goals, feelings, and desires of people and of how those mental states are affected by others’ actions. Instead of being limited to authority-oriented, consequentialist pre-conventional moral reasoning, preschoolers make intentionality judgments in evaluations of moral culpability and distinguish moral violations from other kinds of rule violations on the basis of their human consequences. In early childhood, not later, the development of cooperative relationships of mutual obligation in the family is associated with children’s moral internalization. Early moral sensitivity becomes incorporated into self-awareness as young children begin to understand themselves as persons who seek to do the right thing. At the same time, they are beginning to perceive themselves within broader social networks involving differentiated moral obligations. As researchers of early moral development have appreciated, the conceptual skills of the early years are a foundation for the development of a humanistic, cooperative, and relational moral orientation, not an obstacle to be overcome in later years.

It is important, of course, not to exaggerate the meaning or scope of these findings. Because of limitations in self-regulatory capacities, social understanding, and cognitive flexibility, early moral sensibility is inconsistently manifested and situationally influenced. Young children obviously have far to go in the development of ethical judgment, compassion, and moral character. But the developmental achievements of early childhood should not be overlooked as a basis for later achievements in moral development. Moreover, by seriously considering developmental processes contributing to early moral sensibility, new questions arise concerning the later extension of these trajectories.

Later developments in theory of mind, for example, contribute in several ways to further changes in moral understanding. First, children become more aware of the mind’s activity in the construction of knowledge and of the influence of mental expectations, biases, and beliefs in the interpretation of experience (Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 2002). This may contribute to children’s metacognitive awareness of influences on their own moral judgments and to their capacities to evaluate others’ judgments of fairness or responsibility in light of these cognitive constructions. Second, children become more aware of how differences in personality and experience influence mental activity (e.g., Heyman & Gelman, 1999) and of how these background characteristics can affect moral judgments and behavior and alter evaluations of moral culpability. During this period, in other words, children are becoming increasingly capable of psychologically informed person-based evaluations of moral conduct and are extending their moral sensitivity to people outside of personal awareness. Third, advances in theory of mind also permit the development of more complex representations of relational obligations and their moral implications, particularly the reciprocity of sociomoral behavior. These also merit further study.

Parent–child relationships also have a developing influence on the growth of moral character. Lapsley and Narvaez (2004) have proposed that parent–child discourse is a critical forum for the development of moral character in childhood, particularly as parents incorporate moral evaluations, causal attributions, emotional inferences, and behavioral expectations into their representations of children’s recent experiences (see also Thompson, 2006). They argue that through such parent–child conversations, some children develop easily primed and readily activated moral schemas and behavioral scripts related to moral conduct. Although conversational discourse has been studied in terms of its influences on moral internalization in early childhood, there has been little attention to parent–child discourse outside of the discipline encounter as an influence on the development of moral character at older ages.

In middle childhood and adolescence, social influences outside the family are increasingly important to moral development. Peer expectations for morally relevant conduct, for example, become more influential to the generation of internalized moral standards (Killen & Rutland, 2011). The research on school and

civic engagement further suggests that participation in voluntary activities to assist others is associated with growth in moral character (e.g., Atkins, Hart, & Donnelly, 2004; Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007; Nucci, 2006). For some children, these school and civic commitments are preceded by family activities that also involve them in prosocial efforts (such as working at a food bank). There is little systematic study of how participation in such activities develops and is maintained over time, however, especially with respect to the influence of parental and peer relationships.

Finally, developmental processes associated with the growth of moral identity build on and extend the “moral self” founded in early childhood. How does the moral self evolve into a more complex, differentiated moral identity—that is, a sense of self for which moral concerns are important? If the research literature on the development of self provides guidance (e.g., Harter, 1999), we can hypothesize that in middle childhood, the moral self is likely to become increasingly oriented around children’s perceptions of their admirable and dishonorable conduct in areas that matter personally to them, whether concerning their treatment of their friends, their maintenance of obligations to family or other important social groups, their sense of personal integrity in challenging situations, or other self-chosen concerns. The process of social comparison with peers may also be important to the sense of oneself as a moral being in middle childhood. Moreover, personal autobiographical narratives are significant to the construction of identity throughout adolescence and adulthood (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Important questions, yet largely unexplored, concern the influence of moral issues as themes of personal autobiographical narratives that are self-defining in youth. In particular, to what extent is moral identity shaped by personal turning points related to experiences of values conflict, success, or failure in upholding moral standards, or transformation of beliefs?

There are other later advances in moral development that merit exploration as they relate to earlier growth in moral sensibility, including parent–adolescent conflict in the context of growing adolescent autonomy (e.g., Smetana, Daddis, & Chuang, 2003), moral conduct in relation to developing emotion understanding and expectancies (e.g., Arsenio, Gold, & Adams, 2004), growing ingroup/outgroup understanding as it relates to racial as well as gender exclusion among peers (e.g., Killen, Kelly, Richardson, Crystal, & Ruck, 2010), and other areas. Together, they illustrate the rich developmental thinking that can be stimulated by a new appraisal of the early foundations of moral understanding.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of a vigorous research literature concerning the origins of moral sensitivity in early childhood presents an opportunity to begin constructing a genuinely life-span moral development theory, especially in light of the comparably rich research on the development of moral character, judgment, and identity

at later ages. Equally importantly, it enables developmental theorists to understand moral development in relation to a much more sophisticated range of conceptual, relational, affective, and self-related foundations established in the early years. Recognizing these early foundations does not obscure the significant advances in moral development in the years that follow. Rather, it enables developmentalists to understand that these achievements have deep, constructive roots in the experiences of young children.

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