

CHAPTER 11

**The Development of Virtue***A Perspective from Developmental Psychology*

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Virtue ethics, by comparison with other normative theories, emphasizes the character of the actor. It recognizes, as most people intuitively do, that moral evaluations are not just act-based but are also person-centered judgments. How, then, are virtuous character traits cultivated in the person? One approach to this question is to focus, as many ancient and modern theories do, on the refinement of character, such as that which occurs through an individual's self-reflection, the growth of compassion, or other processes discussed in the chapters of this volume.

Another approach is to consider the cultivation of virtue in childhood. The nurturance of character, the capacity for admirable judgment and well-intentioned conduct, is a central childrearing goal of most parents. And ancient and modern theories have also had much to say about the cultivation of virtuous character in children. They have focused, for example, on teaching and nurturing mature judgment, constraining selfish motives through social control, liberating children's natural goodness, fostering the maturation of moral emotions, and other approaches. These views have been based partly on divergent views of human nature: Rousseau's romantic portrayal of the gentle savage, Locke's educable *tabula rasa* and Hobbes's nasty, brutish life of man have very different implications for the cultivation of virtuous character in children.

Further attention to the cultivation of virtue in children has much to offer virtue ethics. Understanding the developmental origins of virtuous character can contribute insight into how and when dispositions toward compassion, benevolence, and equity emerge to guide conduct. It can contribute understanding of how children become morally self-aware and how seeing oneself as a moral actor influences their behavior in different situations. Consideration of the growth of moral character draws attention to the formal and informal moral education that occurs in the context of children's everyday interactions with parents, other family members, and peers. Understanding the cultivation of virtue in children situates the growth of moral character in the context of developmental advances in thinking, emotion, social and moral understanding, the development of self and self-regulation, and the influence of close relationships.

Understanding the growth of moral character in children brings us necessarily to the study of human development. For several decades, developmental scientists have studied the growth of moral understanding and judgment, the origins of differences in moral conduct, and the emergence of moral emotions.¹ Although researchers have rarely focused explicitly on virtue, their studies address the development of empathy and compassion, judgments of fairness and justice, the motivation to help others, conscience, and other relevant issues. One legacy of this work is the widely known theory of Lawrence Kohlberg, which highlighted the development of principled moral judgment in middle childhood and adolescence and its associations with cognitive growth and moral conduct.²

Interestingly, however, some of the most vigorous contemporary research related to the development of moral character has focused on young children, whom Kohlberg and others of his time characterized as egocentric and reward-oriented. Newer research, however, offers a much different perspective, which can be summarized in this way. Far from being egocentric, early-developing conceptual and emotional skills provide the basis for a primitive "pre-moral sensibility" as young children become sensitive to others' feelings and goals, make morally relevant evaluations of others' conduct based on human needs, and become capable of cooperative and prosocial action. This early-emerging pre-moral sensibility is refined in early childhood as young children engage with adults on everyday issues of responsibility, fairness, and helping. It also contributes to the growth of a "moral self" by which moral appraisals become important to the child. Moral character and virtue are thus constructed from early cognitive-emotional primitives and are advanced by growing understanding of self and others and experience in close relationships. This new, post-Kohlbergian view suggests that the cultivation of virtue begins early in life as young children are developing a sense of who they are in relation to others.³

This newer view from current research faces several challenges. What kind of evidence can be adduced to characterize young children as socially and emotionally insightful in this way? Why do young children so often act in a self-centered manner if they are capable of understanding others' needs and feelings? And for present purposes, how is this research relevant to the development of virtue or the growth of moral character?

The purpose of this chapter is to describe recent studies relevant to the development of virtuous character in the early years and its implications for the psychology of moral development and for virtue theory. In the section that follows, I discuss research related to the early development of a "pre-moral sensibility," an intuitive sense of desirable conduct based on a rudimentary understanding of people's feelings and needs that, while not explicitly moral in nature, provides a psychological foundation for moral growth. Next, I consider research on early conscience that underscores the constructive characteristics of parent-child relationships that contribute to developing cooperation, compliance, concern for others, and other indicators of an internalized moral sense in early childhood. Conscience is also related to a developing "moral self" in young children, which is discussed in the section that follows. Next I consider some of the objections to this portrayal of early-developing aspects of moral character and some of the provisional responses of developmental scientists, before concluding with reflections on the relevance of these studies for the cultivation of virtue.

A comment on method. Studying children's development requires empirical methods with which many readers of this volume may be unacquainted, so I strive to explain relevant research procedures to convey how these conclusions are reached. This is especially important because the conceptual and emotional competencies of very young children can easily be overlooked or misunderstood: toddlers cannot tell us what they know, and often their behavior in everyday situations can lead to multiple intuitive interpretations. This has always been true. Darwin observed his young son, Doddy, and saw an emotionally sensitive, morally perceptive infant, while Piaget saw a budding scientist in his observations of his infant offspring (and Freud gleaned from his adult patients the childhood sexuality at the core of developing personality). The tools of contemporary developmental science do not eliminate observer bias in the interpretation of children's behavior, but scientific method constrains it according to the rules and procedures of empirical inquiry. At times, as readers shall see, these procedures involve carefully designed experiments to try to elucidate young children's understanding when competing influences are controlled; on other occasions, research procedures more closely resemble everyday interactions between children and other people. In most cases, the research described here

is representative of a broader range of studies on which these conclusions are based, and I also strive to explain the limits of current understanding as well as what is known.

The most important benefit of these research procedures is that the findings they yield may (and often do) surprise us, and thus question our intuitions, as well as informing us. If the methods described in the discussion that follows seem far afield from the philosophical study of virtue or moral character, it is because we are trying to peer into the mind of a young child to discern the building blocks of mature moral competence. It is a challenging but worthwhile enterprise.

DEVELOPING AN EARLY PREMORAL SENSIBILITY

The challenge of trying to understand what preverbal children think about other people is illustrated by the following experiment.⁴ An 18-month-old toddler sits on his mother's lap and faces an experimenter and some unusual objects on the table between them, just out of reach of the child. One at a time, the experimenter manipulates each object in a manner that suggests that he is trying but failing to accomplish what he intends to do. For example, he suspends a string of beads over a cup but fails three times to drop them into the cup, instead causing the beads to fall to the table outside the cup. On another occasion, he holds a small plastic dumbbell before the child and pulls on each end, but his hands slip off one end or the other and he fails to pull apart the dumbbell on each of three trials. After the trials, the object is then placed in front of the toddler. Toddlers immediately picked up each object, but they did not subsequently imitate the behavior of the experimenter. Instead, they performed the act that he was *intending*: pulling apart the dumbbell, or dropping the beads into the cup. Most young children did so easily and without hesitation. Indeed, they performed the intended action at a comparable rate to another group of toddlers who had watched the experimenter successfully demonstrate the target action. But whereas the latter group may have simply imitated what they observed the adult doing, the first group had to infer the adult's intended action.

Are 18-month-olds thus sensitive to the intentions underlying human behavior? A follow-up experiment probed further by repeating the "failed attempt" procedure with the dumbbell, but instead of human fingers slipping off the end of the dumbbell, this action was performed by a mechanical device consisting of metal arms with pincers while the experimenter sat motionless. Toddlers were captivated by the activity of the mechanical

device trying, but failing, to pull apart the dumbbell. When the dumbbell was placed before them, however, few performed the intended action. In fact, children were six times more likely to pull apart the dumbbell after watching the human experimenter attempt to do so than after seeing the mechanical arms attempt this.⁵ Toddlers appeared to make inferences of intentionality when appraising human, not mechanical, behavior.

Early Understanding of Other People

Other experiments have also demonstrated sensitivity to human goals and intentions in 12- and 18-month-olds,⁶ and using different procedures, some researchers have found evidence for infants' rudimentary grasp of human intentions earlier in the first year.⁷ When watching people, toddlers interpret their actions in terms of their inferred goals and intentions, and this seems to be an early aspect of social understanding.

Human goals and intentions are not the only psychological processes in others of which very young children become aware. Infants respond appropriately to the emotions they perceive in another's face and voice, responding positively to expressions of happiness and cautiously to angry or sad expressions, and they show concerned attention to the distress of another.⁸ By 18 months, toddlers have become adept at using emotional expressions to infer another's desires: they seem to be aware that people are happy when they get what they want and sad when they do not get what they want, or when they get what they do not want. One experiment showed that on this basis, toddlers gave more broccoli to an experimenter who had previously exhibited pleasure when eating broccoli and disgust when eating crackers, even though the children themselves preferred eating the crackers and disliked the broccoli.⁹

Developmental theorists believe that these early achievements in social understanding derive, in part, from children's experience of themselves as agentic, intentional, emotional, desirous beings.¹⁰ In other words, the salient feelings, strong desires, and goal-directed efforts that increasingly characterize their own behavior seem to also afford interpretive lenses for how young children construe the reasons other people act as they do. Watching a parent walk to the refrigerator every day, for example, 1-year-olds infer that the parent is doing so *in order to* open the door and get something inside—and indeed, this inference of goal-directed intentionality is confirmed on most occasions by the adult's subsequent behavior. In experimental situations such as those just described, toddlers demonstrate that they can derive similar inferences even from watching unfamiliar actions of an unacquainted adult.

In making these inferences, infants and toddlers are at a very early stage of constructing a theory-like understanding of how others' minds function. This conceptual task will continue throughout childhood and contribute to their social and emotional competence as children better understand different mental elements (e.g., mistaken thoughts, memories) and mental functions (e.g., biases, expectations, and other mentally constructive processes).¹¹ These early achievements illustrate the non-egocentric quality of early social understanding because young children exhibit no confusion of their own perspective, understanding, or intention with that of another. In addition, these achievements are important for present purposes in two ways. First, they provide a basis for the development of *shared intentionality* by which young children become capable of spontaneously entering into and sharing the intentions, goals and feelings of another, and behaving accordingly. Second, they provide a basis for young children's responses to people who help or hinder others' needs, desires, or goals.

Shared Intentionality

Consider again the "failed-attempt" study profiled earlier. The conclusion that toddlers could infer the experimenter's intended action was based on young children completing that action successfully. In a sense, these children readily accomplished for the adult the goal that he was trying but failing to achieve for himself. The conclusion that toddlers reveal their understanding of others' goals by helping to accomplish them was studied further in another experiment. In this study, researchers observed 18-month-olds in a variety of simple situations in which the child could provide assistance to an adult.¹² An adult was drawing with a marker and then accidentally dropped it on the floor near the child, for example, or mistakenly dropped a spoon he was using through a hole in a box where the child could reach it. In the experimental conditions, the adult signaled a need for help in several ways, such as by reaching toward the marker that had been accidentally dropped, or reaching for the spoon that had been lost through the hole, while looking perplexed. In the control conditions, the same outcome was reached through the deliberate action of the adult (e.g., intentionally tossing the marker on the floor; deliberately putting the spoon through the hole), and the adult did not try to retrieve the lost object or otherwise signal a need for assistance.

Toddlers were significantly more likely to help the adult in the experimental than in the control conditions—that is, when the adult's intentions were waylaid by accidental misfortune and the adult appeared to need assistance. Toddlers were never thanked or rewarded by the adult for helping,

and another experiment showed that providing extrinsic rewards undermined the frequency of their assistance.¹³ Toddlers instead seemed to be motivated to spontaneously assist an adult stranger independently of reward when they could discern the adult's goals and were capable of helping the adult achieve them.

These and related behaviors reflect, according to several researchers, a developing capacity for shared intentionality, in which young children participate in activity with another that involves shared psychological states, especially their goals and intentions.¹⁴ Shared intentionality is believed to be a uniquely evolved human characteristic that enables people not only to understand another's intentions (which some primates can do) but also to share them and other psychological states. Why would children do so? One reason is that this enables young children to better understand other people, since participating in their intentionality is one way of comprehending what they are doing, how they are doing it, and why. It also contributes to social communication and understanding. Viewed broadly, shared intentionality provides the basis for language learning, collaborative problem solving, cooperative social games (including shared pretend play), and many forms of cultural learning. It is reflected in the simple helping acts observed in the experiments reported here, as well as how 1-year-olds point and gesture to prompt another person's attention or continue with a shared activity.¹⁵ The development of shared intentionality means that much socially constructive conduct of this kind develops, not through external incentives and rewards, but as a natural accompaniment to children's understanding others' intentions and their spontaneous participation in the intentional orientation of another.¹⁶

Responding to the Actions of Others

What happens, then, when young children observe someone else helping or hindering another person from accomplishing his goals? If shared intentionality derives from young children understanding the goals of others' behavior, then they might also apply this understanding to their appraisal of the behavior of third parties. They might respond differently, in other words, when an actor assists in the achievement of someone's goals compared to another actor who impedes that achievement. This was explored in an experiment in which 18- to 24-month-olds sat on their mothers' laps while they watched two adults interacting with each other across a table.¹⁷ In the experimental condition, one adult showed the child her necklace and belt, drew a picture, and created a clay sculpture, admiring the object in each

case. The second adult watched her, and then took the necklace and belt for herself or destroyed the picture and sculpture. The victim did not respond to these actions and appeared emotionally impassive. In the control condition, the adult displayed the necklace and belt and created the drawing and sculpture as described above, but the second adult instead took a different necklace and belt that were within the child's view and destroyed a blank sheet of paper and a clay ball. Thus, the significant difference between these two conditions was whether one adult's goals (enjoying the objects she owned or made) were undermined by the actions of another adult.

Afterward, the second adult brought three balloons into the room, and gave one to the first adult and gave the remaining two balloons to the child. A minute later, the adult's balloon was "accidentally" released and it rose to the ceiling, out of reach, and the adult looked sad. Children's responses were observed for two minutes before the adult found a chair and retrieved her balloon. Young children who had previously witnessed that adult being victimized by another in the experimental condition were significantly more likely to help that person, such as by giving her a balloon, hugging or patting the adult, or making suggestions for retrieving the balloon, compared to children in the control condition who were much more likely to simply pay attention to the situation without doing anything else. Although there was nothing the toddlers could do to restore the victim's necklace, belt, or artwork, children appeared to respond more positively and helpfully to the victim when they had the opportunity to do so.

Similar results have been found in other studies using comparable procedures. Using a puppet stage, for example, another study found that 19- to 23-month-olds were more likely to provide rewards to a puppet who was previously observed as helpful to another puppet (i.e., retrieving a ball the other puppet had dropped), and to take rewards from a puppet who had previously acted harmfully to another (i.e., taking away the dropped ball).¹⁸ It is noteworthy that in these situations, young children's helping could not directly address the consequences to the victim of what was done. Instead, children provided benefits to the victim, or denied them to the perpetrator.

At somewhat older ages, children respond similarly in more complex circumstances. In one study, 3 1/2-year-olds were told a story, with pictures, of two girls who were baking cookies, but in which one girl quit to play while the other finished the baking alone. When it was time to allocate the cookies, even though most children were initially inclined to distribute them equally, three-fourths of the children made a simple distributive justice judgment and indicated that the child who contributed more should receive more of the cookies.¹⁹ In another study using doll play, children of the same age showed that they believed that a protagonist would prefer to give

rewards to another doll who had previously helped her compared to one who had not. They also indicated that a protagonist would prefer to give rewards to a doll who had previously been generous to another doll compared to one who had not.²⁰

Yet another study showed that 3-year-olds not only assist the victim of harm that they have witnessed but also protest the harmful act and tattle on the perpetrator.²¹ And contrary to the traditional view that young children are consequentialist rather than focused on good or bad intentions, 3-year-olds also respond based on a person's intentions. In a study by Vaish, Carpenter, and Tomasello, 3-year-olds participated in an experimental condition involving an adult showing her necklace and belt, drawing a picture, and creating a clay sculpture as before.²² In this situation, however, the second adult tried but failed to damage or destroy the objects and, after a moment, returned them to the table. When children were observed in a subsequent helping task, however, they were much less likely to provide assistance to the adult who had intended harm compared to another adult who had been present but uninvolved. Even though the "victim" had not really been harmed at all, 3-year-olds still denied benefits to the adult with apparently bad intentions.

Taken together, these studies suggest that from a very early age, young children are constructing a rudimentary understanding of why people act as they do—more specifically, the internal, mental states that account for people's actions. Along with their understanding that people act on the basis of their perceptions and sensations, they also become aware that intentions, desires, emotions, and goals are also significant motivators of human conduct.²³ This understanding further allows young children to participate in these internal experiences of others—to look where another person is glancing (shared attention), participate in another's happiness or distress (shared emotion or empathy), and help achieve another person's goals.

Shared intentionality has at least two important implications for the development of a premoral sensibility. First, young children are capable of cooperative, prosocial behavior not because of external incentives but, rather, as a spontaneous result of understanding and sharing others' goals, and knowing how to assist in their achievement. The motivation for doing so does not necessarily derive from its moral value as much as from the intrinsic rewards of social participation and understanding, but it can become enlisted into a moral value system, such as when parents explicitly associate helpful acts with consideration for others. Second, young children appraise the behavior of other people in terms of its effects on others' goals, and they reward those who assist, punish those who hinder, and offer beneficence to

those who were previously victimized by a hinderer. The motivation for children's responses in these contexts is not necessarily explicitly moral, but there are suggestions in these findings of children's approval of helpers and disapproval of hinderers.

Thus from early in life, young children are developing an intuitive and non-egocentric sense of right or desirable conduct based on its consequences for others' goals and desires, and which may provide the basis for judgments of fairness, equity, and even simple justice.²⁴ There are many unanswered questions remaining to be studied, however. Some relate to furthering this developmental account, and better understanding whether and how this premoral sensibility becomes associated with later forms of moral understanding and judgment, as well as the development of virtue. Other questions concern the wide individual variability in young children's responses to these experimental tasks and understanding the origins of these differences (in the next section, I discuss some of these influences in the context of conscience development). Other questions require elucidating the reasons for young children's differential responding to helpers, hinderers, and victims in these experimental procedures, and the intuitive judgments they entail. Several research groups are currently at work on these tasks.

Our research group is one of them. In a recent study, we observed 18-month-olds in the kinds of helping situations described above involving dropped markers and spoons. We also observed these children in more demanding kinds of tasks, such as deciding whether to share snack crackers or toys with an adult experimenter who had none, or whether to try to repair the adult's favorite toy that had broken and this made her sad.²⁵ We found that even at this early age, toddlers were consistent in their responses, with one group providing assistance in each kind of situation and another group responding minimally each time. Furthermore, two characteristics of the child's interaction with the mother, observed independently, were associated with whether children were consistent helpers or not. First, when mothers made frequent references to the thoughts, emotions, and desires of story characters during a book-reading task, their children were more likely to assist the adult, perhaps because these mental state references help the young child understand the feelings and thoughts of others. Second, mothers who were more sensitively responsive to the child's interests and intentions during a free-play observation had children who were more likely to assist the adult. Viewed from the perspective of shared intentionality, it is possible that having experienced the mother entering helpfully into their own intentional states, these children generalized this understanding to their interactions with other people.

Emotion Understanding

Shared intentionality is manifested in joint activities based on shared attention, goals, and intentions. It is also apparent in shared emotions. Indeed, some researchers believe that a very early capacity for resonant or empathic responding to another's distress provides a foundation for more complex forms of shared emotion, such as compassion, and their association with helping and caring at later ages.²⁶ As earlier noted, young children understand that emotions are linked to the satisfaction or frustration of goals and desires, and thus by reading another's emotional expressions one gains insight into other mental states. Another's distress, sadness, or anger also increases the salience of the causes of these emotions and the actions that might alleviate them. For these reasons, emotion understanding is part of an early premoral sensibility because of how emotions are associated with situations related to helping or hindering another's goals and, more generally, the well-being of other people. The connection of emotion understanding to others' needs and interests and the sharing of that emotion may also contribute, for some children, to the development of virtuous qualities such as compassion and respect for others.

Emotion understanding is part of an early premoral sensibility also because of how parents enlist emotion understanding in early values socialization. Mothers justify their enforcement of moral rules with their 2- and 3-year-old children on the basis of people's needs and welfare, but they justify social conventional rules instead in terms of social order and regulation.²⁷ Consequently, by age 3 or 4, young children view moral violations as more serious, and moral rules as irrevocable (i.e., valid regardless of social guidelines), justifying their judgments in terms of unfairness and the harm to others entailed in moral violations.²⁸ The needs of others and the feelings associated with them early distinguish their conceptions of moral values from other kinds of social rules.

Despite their skills in interpreting others' emotions, however, the sight and sound of another person in distress is a conceptually and motivationally complex event for a young child. Understanding the causes of another person's distress, whether those causes have implications for oneself, and whether—and how—that person's upset can be allayed are cognitively challenging considerations for young children. Because in most circumstances they may be incapable of acting in a helpful manner or unaware of how to do so, even if they are motivated sympathetically to help, many young children can be observed in a demeanor of "concerned attention" in response to a distressed person. Acting helpfully in everyday situations requires, therefore, the development of a sympathetic response to another's distress

and the behavioral competence to intervene helpfully, and these capacities develop according to different timelines in the early years.

CONSCIENCE DEVELOPMENT

The term *conscience* has a long and complex heritage in philosophy and religious traditions. As the term has recently been appropriated by psychologists, it refers to the developmental processes by which young children construct and act consistently with internal, generalizable standards of conduct.²⁹ The capacity for internalized moral conduct has traditionally been viewed as an achievement of late childhood or adolescence, but contemporary research on conscience development has focused on early childhood as the period when the foundations of conscience are established. Developmental researchers have focused on the growth of conscience in early childhood and the influences associated with individual differences in conscience development, which may be viewed as foreshadowing the development of moral character. Consistent with the preceding discussion, conscience is based on the premoral sensibility that develops in the early years, and is influenced by the young child's temperamental characteristics and developing capacities for self-regulation. Most important, researchers have found that the quality of parent-child relationships is central to the development of conscience and the growth of individual differences in moral conduct that may be associated with virtuous character.

According to one prominent developmental theory by Grazyna Kochanska, early conscience development is founded on the growth of a mutually responsive orientation between parent and child that sensitizes the young child to the reciprocal obligations of close relationships.³⁰ Young children are accustomed to others caring for them. But as they become more competent, children are increasingly expected to help with household tasks, cooperate with family members, comply with adult requests, accommodate the needs and desires of others, resist impulses to behave in disapproved ways, and act in a socially appropriate manner. Most young children are capable of doing so—at least some of the time—owing to their sensitivity to others' goals and needs, together with the rewards derived from compliant conduct and the sanctions associated with misbehavior. Kochanska argues that a further incentive is the quality of the parent-child relationship.³¹ Parental warmth and sensitive responsiveness elicit complementary responses in young children, who are thus motivated to cooperate and respond constructively to parental requests to maintain this relational harmony. Such a view is consistent with the research findings discussed earlier concerning

maternal sensitivity and toddlers' prosocial responding in the context of shared intentionality. These positive relational incentives also motivate children to adopt parental values and seek to behave accordingly. Such a view is consistent with the ideas of contemporary attachment theory, but contrasts with traditional conceptualizations of early moral compliance motivated by fear of punishment or parental love withdrawal.³²

How is conscience measured in young children? As early as age 2 1/2, children are observed at home or in laboratory playrooms as their mothers seek to elicit their cooperation either when mother is present (e.g., asking the child to put away toys the child had been playing with) or absent (e.g., prohibiting the child from touching attractive toys on a shelf, and then leaving the room).³³ Children's willing cooperation and compliance in maternal absence are viewed as reflecting conscience development at this early age. For older children, conscience assessments include children's rule-compliant behavior when there are opportunities and incentives to cheat, responses to hypothetical stories involving moral dilemmas, emotional responses to apparent mishaps (e.g., believing that the child had broken a toy that was rigged to fall apart), sympathetic concern for another's distress, and children's morally relevant self-perceptions ("moral self").³⁴ These different assessments are intended to resemble everyday age-appropriate circumstances of cooperation, concern for others, and obedience, and although they are early oriented toward young children's compliance, these assessments increasingly encompass the more complex cognitive, emotional, and self-referential dimensions of moral conduct at older ages.

Children's conscience-related behavior develops significantly with age, as would be expected. Young children better understand behavioral standards and become more cooperative and compliant with increasing age.³⁵ Individual differences on measures of early conscience tend to remain consistent during this time: toddlers who are more enthusiastically cooperative and compliant become older preschoolers who are less likely to cheat on difficult games, provide socially constructive responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas, and describe themselves as children who try to do the right thing.³⁶ This consistency over time could result from the growth of characteristics related to moral dispositions or virtuous character, the influence of hereditary temperamental qualities related to conscience, and/or the continuing quality of the parent-child relationship, and there is research evidence that all three processes are influential.³⁷ There is a strong association, for example, between children's conscience and measures of the positive, mutual responsiveness between child and mother that are derived from independent observations of their shared activity.³⁸ This association is confirmed longitudinally when positive mutuality is observed

when children are toddlers and conscience is assessed as they enter school several years later.³⁹ Children's temperamental characteristics are also influential, especially as they interact with the quality of the parent-child relationship to influence conscience development. One study showed that children with a hereditary vulnerability to self-regulatory problems were lower on conscience at age 5 1/2 when maternal care was poorly responsive, but children with the same hereditary vulnerability were more advanced in conscience development in the context of responsive maternal care.⁴⁰

Further research has focused on other relational influences on early conscience. What happens, for example, when young children misbehave? In our lab, we recorded the conversations of mothers with their 2 1/2-year-old children during conflict episodes in the lab and at home, and subsequently measured the child's conscience development at age 3.⁴¹ Mothers who more frequently discussed people's feelings and who tried to resolve conflict by explaining and justifying their requests had children who were more advanced on measures of conscience six months later. Even though maternal references to rules and the consequences of breaking them were also coded in these conversations, they were unrelated to conscience development. These findings were substantively replicated in another study that focused on the conversations of mothers with their 4-year-olds about past instances of the child's good or bad behavior.⁴² Maternal comments about people's feelings, not to rules and the consequences of breaking them, were associated with conscience development. In another study, 2- to 3-year-old children whose mothers used reasoning and conveyed humanistic concerns when resolving conflict with them were more advanced in measures of moral understanding at kindergarten and first grade.⁴³ Consistently with young children's developing comprehension of moral standards in terms of human needs and welfare, therefore, mothers who discuss misbehavior in terms of the emotional consequences of morally relevant conduct are more likely to foster conscience development than those who focus on judgments of rule-oriented compliance.⁴⁴

Although the behavioral manifestations of conscience in young children provide only a glance into the development of moral character or virtue, the relational influences highlighted by this work are potentially important. These studies contribute to the view that the positive incentives for moral growth provided in parent-child relationships may be more important than the negative incentives afforded by punishment and the threat of love withdrawal. In a manner also found to be true of older children and adolescents, young children are sensitized to issues of fairness, responsibility, and care through parent-child relationships that exemplify mutual respect and

cooperation and through parent-child conversations that highlight the human consequences of the child's conduct.⁴⁵

The importance of parent-child relationships and emotion sensitivity extends also to circumstances of voluntary assistance. In another study from our lab, Thompson and Winer observed 4-year-olds in a series of age-appropriate helping, sharing, and repair/assistance tasks, and also elicited mother-child conversations about past instances in which the child was helpful or not helpful to another person.⁴⁶ As in our earlier research, these 4-year-olds showed considerable consistency in their assistance to the experimenter across the different tasks. Mothers whose children were most prosocial more often discussed people's emotions and made more frequent evaluative comments about the child's behavior in conversation. As in the studies of conscience, maternal discussion of rules and rule-based justifications for helping others was never associated with preschoolers' actual helping in the lab. These findings, although preliminary, suggest that sensitivity to people's feelings, especially in the context of supportive parent-child relationships, is important not only to children's compliance with adult requests but also to their motivation to offer voluntary assistance.

The importance of conversational catalysts to the development of moral understanding is not limited to early childhood. Although the early years may be formative, Lapsley and Narvaez have argued that the quality of parent-child discourse may also be important at later ages, particularly as parents incorporate moral evaluations, causal attributions, and behavioral expectations into their conversations with older children about the child's experiences.⁴⁷ As a consequence, they argue, some children develop easily primed and readily activated nonconscious moral schemas that cause them to appraise everyday situations in morally relevant ways and that guide their conduct. This gets us closer to the development of moral character and the cultivation of virtue, especially as these moral appraisals extend to volitional moral conduct (such as helping and sharing), in addition to the obligatory moral standards that are more often the focus of early moral socialization. Our research suggests that both aspects of moral conduct begin to develop early and are influenced by the quality of parent-child relationships and conversation.

In sum, research in this area suggests that positive moral dispositions develop in the context of responsive relationships of mutuality in the family, and are enhanced in parent-child conversations that highlight the feelings and needs of others, rather than rule-oriented compliance. Unanswered questions in this field remain important, however. Some concern the nature of "conscience" and its relevance to the development of moral character. Although behaving consistently with internalized values is a developmen-

tally important accomplishment, do young children with strong conscience development become conventional, compliant adolescents and adults, or does conscience provide a foundation for deeper moral judgment, flexibility, and even courage? The relevant longitudinal studies remain to be done. Moreover, little is known of how assessments of conscience are associated with young children's behavior with people outside the family, such as peers and other adults.⁴⁸ Extending research in this area to other contexts and partners will enable researchers to better understand the generality and robustness of the characteristics observed primarily with mothers in these studies.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE "MORAL SELF"

Moral identity, as it is studied by psychologists, can be defined as the construction of a sense of self around moral values.⁴⁹ Adults for whom moral concerns are central to identity and self-understanding are more likely to feel an obligation to act consistently with moral values, even though many other influences also affect conduct in specific situations.⁵⁰ Little is known, however, about the early development of moral identity and how moral values become important to self-understanding and the development of virtuous character.

Developmental researchers have begun to explore the growth of the "moral self" in early childhood. The moral self can be defined as the child's view of himself or herself as a "good" person who tries to do the right thing, as defined by parental expectations and internal moral values.⁵¹ Developmental scientists who study young children's self-understanding must do so using unconventional approaches because preschoolers lack the linguistic skills to convey clearly, in response to direct questions, their sense of themselves according to abstract personality qualities or moral virtues. They can, however, respond competently to simpler kinds of inquiries. One such procedure invites children to interact with a pair of puppets in a theatre who explain that they want to find out about "kids your age" and, to do so, they will describe themselves and the child can then describe himself or herself. The two puppets then proceed to describe themselves in terms of opposite characteristics before asking the child to respond. For example, one puppet says, "I like to be with other people" and the other responds "I like to be by myself," and then the child is asked what he or she is like. Several research groups have found that when young children respond in this way to a carefully designed range of bipolar descriptors designed to assess specific personality characteristics, children provide consistent judg-

ments that seem to reflect an underlying, coherent representation of their internal qualities.⁵² Preschoolers' self-descriptions are internally consistent, for example, and are similar to parent and teacher descriptions of the child. These studies show that personality qualities like positive or negative mood, timidity, aggressiveness, and agreeableness emerge as salient aspects of early self-awareness, together with a more generally positive or negative self-concept.

Kochanska and colleagues have adapted this procedure to examine 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"). 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 emotions (e.g., empathy, discomfort after wrongdoing), moral motivation (e.g., internalized conduct), and other characteristics.⁵³ In a longitudinal study, these researchers found that measures of conscience development when children were age 2 to 4 1/2 were significantly associated with the "moral self" at age 5 1/2 which, in turn, predicted school-age measures of competent conduct.⁵⁴ More specifically, preschoolers who were more cooperative and compliant with the parent described themselves at age 5 1/2 as children who try to do the right thing, and these children were rated by parents and teachers as showing more social-emotionally competent behavior at age 6 1/2. The latter included broad assessments of the child's school engagement, peer acceptance, emotional health, and prosocial behavior by teachers and parents. These findings suggest, therefore, the emergence of relatively consistent individual traits that might be associated with the growth of moral character or virtuous qualities.

Developmental researchers who use these puppet interview procedures do not assume that young children comprehend their personality or moral qualities with the conceptual richness of an adult. But these findings suggest that preschoolers have a richer sense of self than has been traditionally assumed. Young children also vary in the extent to which being a "good boy" or "good girl" is important to them, and this is associated with independent measures of conscience development and later behavior. These findings are consistent with other research that underscores how much developing self-awareness is colored by parental responses to behavior of young children. Children begin to exhibit behaviors reflecting self-evaluative emotions like pride, shame, and guilt late in the second year, and these emotions most often appear in achievement or moral contexts in which parents applaud children's desirable behavior and are critical of undesirable con-

duct.⁵⁵ Parents' evaluative comments (e.g., "that was not a good thing to do," "you were nice to help in that way") occur frequently in discussions of morally relevant behavior, and constitute an important influence on how young children evaluate their own conduct.⁵⁶ In light of this, we might expect that young children begin to perceive themselves in ways relevant to their compliance with parental expectations as they are also developing a broader and morally relevant understanding of themselves as persons.

Much less is known, however, about the characteristics of parent-child interaction that contribute to differences in the "moral self" in young children—that is, why some children perceive themselves as striving to be cooperative, make amends, feel badly after misbehavior, while other children do not. Moreover, the longitudinal studies have not yet been conducted that would enable researchers to associate the developing moral self in preschoolers with moral identity at older ages. Thus there remain important questions requiring further study.

CULTIVATING VIRTUE?

Crafting a theoretical argument from research findings is necessarily limited by the available evidence, and readers may feel that they are faced with a glass half empty/glass half full dilemma from the preceding discussion. On one hand, there is much that is *not* known about the development of virtuous character in early childhood, particularly the relevance of early achievements in moral awareness to more mature forms of judgment, identity, and conduct. Whereas research in this area has focused on the developmentally relevant challenges of early childhood—becoming sensitive to the needs of other people, learning how to respond appropriately to those needs, and beginning to develop an internalized compass concerning personal conduct—little is known of how these relate to the later development of moral character or to virtuous qualities of the person. Moreover, the reliance of researchers on carefully designed laboratory procedures highlights the need for further inquiry into young children's conduct in everyday circumstances with peers and adults other than mother. To a developmental scientist, this constitutes an exciting research agenda, but to others it identifies glaring gaps in current knowledge.

On the other hand, what *is* known about the early development of moral awareness is noteworthy. By contrast with traditional portrayals of the egocentric, self-interested young child, it is apparent that early conceptual achievements afford children considerable sensitivity to the internal experiences of others, and this influences children's conduct and their evaluations

of the behavior of others. This premoral sensibility is refined in parent-child interaction that affords an integration of the child's developing conception of desirable conduct in relation to others' goals and feelings with parental values and their justification in relation to others' well-being. Parent-child interaction is also a forum for children's developing self-awareness as moral actors. Virtue has developmental origins, therefore, in an intuitive premoral sensibility that emerges from early psychological understanding and its cultivation in the context of a parent-child relationship that builds on it—particularly positive relational experiences that afford mutual responsiveness, respect, and understanding. Any developmental account that overlooks these early influences risks misunderstanding the origins of moral awareness and of formative influences on moral character.

It is important to clarify what this argument does *not* claim. First, this is not an argument that morality is innate, although other developmental scientists have proposed this.⁵⁷ Nativist arguments are problematic in psychology because they are easy to formulate and difficult to validate. The view that a premoral sensibility builds on a network of early-developing cognitive-emotional primitives does not require assumptions about evolutionary preparedness or natural instincts relevant to morality. Second, this argument does not claim that all or even the most important constituents of moral character emerge in early childhood. It seems undeniable that significant aspects of moral character and virtue develop with subsequent growth in personality, self-regulation, cognitive complexity, self-awareness, and relational experience. This argument claims, rather, that instead of perceiving early childhood as irrelevant to the development of moral character or affording obstacles (such as egocentric thinking) to virtuous conduct, it should instead be regarded as a developmental foundation to the humanistic, cooperative, relational morality that flourishes at later ages.

A more basic question concerns the whether the kinds of behaviors studied in young children are relevant to morality at all. A prominent psychologist who studies moral character, Augusto Blasi, has raised this question.⁵⁸ Blasi has identified criteria of the "common everyday understanding" of moral behavior that require that genuinely moral actions are intentional, that they are informed by moral motives, and that "the agent must want it because it is morally good." These criteria cause him to disregard the kinds of behavior studied in young children as genuinely moral, relegating the advent of truly moral conduct to middle childhood. His analysis raises further questions, of course, about whether moral motives must be explicitly recognized by the actor or can be implicitly influential, and what cognitive prerequisites are required to fulfill the criteria of genuinely moral conduct. In any case, whether the capabilities of young children are defined as moral

or premoral in nature, it seems undeniable that a serious developmental analysis requires understanding how complex competencies at any age emerge from earlier skills that are progenitors to those that come later.

A more searching question concerns the inconsistency between young children's behavior and the capabilities revealed in these experimental studies. If toddlers and preschoolers exhibit such sensitivity to the feelings, goals, and desires of other people, for example, why do their actions in everyday circumstances often seem so self-centered and oblivious to the interests of others? A toddler who shows concerned attention to another child in distress, for instance, may subsequently walk away, laugh, or seek comfort for himself rather than assisting the other child. Advances in developmental neuroscience may provide some insight into this incongruity. Research on brain development has shown that neurobiological regions related to self-regulation are among the slowest to mature.⁵⁹ The neurobiological development of self-regulatory capacities, such as those governing impulse control, attentional focusing, cognitive flexibility, and emotional self-control, begins early but has an extended maturational course, lasting through adolescence into early adulthood.⁶⁰ Because of this, the behavior of young children is often characterized by impulsivity (such as taking an attractive toy from another's grasp), distractibility (such as turning to another activity after watching a peer hurt herself), cognitive inflexibility (such as becoming mentally fixed on a desired activity despite the needs of another), and limited emotional self-regulation—each of which can make young children appear very egocentric.

One reason, therefore, that young children often behave inconsistently with the competencies revealed in experimental studies is that self-regulation mediates between knowing and doing. Young children may be aware of another person's goals and feelings, but acting appropriately on this knowledge requires self-regulatory competencies that are neurobiologically very immature, and need many years for their full development. Carefully designed experimental studies control many of the distractions and competing influences that otherwise might undermine the ability of young children to enact what they know about others' goals, intentions, desires, feelings, and needs. In everyday experience, however, these competing influences often overwhelm their limited self-regulatory skills and undermine performance. Stated simply, what appears to be self-centered conduct may actually be self-regulatory limitations imposed by a slowly maturing brain.⁶¹

To be sure, the behavior of young children is better characterized as inconsistent than as unregulated. Episodes of generosity and cooperation alternate with periods of impulsivity and self-centeredness in the home as

well as the lab. This is one of the reasons why early childhood has typically been disregarded in psychological research on moral development and philosophical reflections on the cultivation of virtue. How can one talk about virtue cultivated when it is so little enacted? But this conundrum may help explain why relational influences are so important to the early growth of conscience and moral awareness. Sensitivity and mutual responsiveness in early parent-child relationships may be important because in these contexts, adults can support young children's limited self-regulatory competencies and enlist them in positive conduct as the child's brain is slowly maturing to support independent self-control. By contrast, a parental emphasis on rule-oriented compliance requires the capacities for independent self-control that young children lack. In the end, virtue may be cultivated even when it is not reliably enacted because its developmental foundations are being established in a premoral sensibility, built on children's understanding of other people, and the responsive relationships that provide support for positive behavior and the development of a moral self.

CONCLUSION

What is the place of early childhood development in moral psychology and virtue ethics? The topics discussed in this review of research on young children—empathy and compassion, emotion understanding of others, moral self-awareness, fairness and equity, helping and benevolence—suggest that it should have an important place in developmental analysis. A conceptual foundation for the growth of moral character emerges in young children's understanding of other people and their relevance to the self, and the quality of early parent-child relationships enlists that understanding into a broader network of values. The problem is that in the past, in both psychology and philosophy, early childhood has been portrayed in extremes—the young child is either the untamed, egocentric beast in need of civilizing, or the morally perceptive altruist in need of liberation. Developmental science suggests that neither depiction is accurate. Rather, virtue is cultivated as children's intuitive premoral sensibility is nurtured in the context of relationships that exemplify, as well as discuss, responsiveness and support.

Unfortunately, in far too many parts of the world, young children are not growing up in such relationally supportive contexts, and their representations of the characteristics of other people and their relevance to the self do not reliably support the growth of virtuous conduct. Thus a concern with early childhood has practical as well as theoretical importance, and is

relevant to public policy as well as to moral psychology and philosophical ethics. Early experiences of children growing up in conditions of adversity and stress merit attention for what these experiences mean for the character that they are developing.⁶²

NOTES

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