

Part One

Moral Persons

The Character in Competence

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Perseverance, grit, efficiency, focus, determination, discipline, industriousness, fortitude, skill. According to existing models of person perception and most experimental studies of moral cognition, these kinds of traits are typically not considered to be relevant to evaluations of moral character (c.f. Pizarro and Tannenbaum 2011). Goodness and badness tend to be defined according to whether or not an individual is likely to be hostile or threatening toward the self. As such, traits and states associated with this perceived likelihood (e.g. compassion, empathy, and trustworthiness) dominate the literature in moral psychology. This flies in the face of a long tradition in virtue ethics that identifies the competence-based qualities listed above as belonging to a broader set of “intellectual virtues,” conceptually distinct but no less important to character than “moral virtues” (Aristotle, fourth century B.C.E; Grube and Reeve 1992). Of course, studies of person perception are simply interested in describing the qualities that contribute to overall assessments of others, and not at all concerned with philosophical accounts of what kinds of traits *ought* to compose moral character. That said, it might strike some as odd that such intellectual virtues are not, according to existing evidence, considered by most perceivers to be morally relevant. And it might strike some as odd that investigations into the processes by which we evaluate others along these dimensions are relatively rare in moral cognition research.

This chapter intends to argue that such evaluations might, in fact, be relevant to individuals’ assessments of moral character and that their categorization as amoral in person perception is misleading. Furthermore, their absence from work on moral cognition represents a gap in the literature that might be profitably filled in the future. I will begin by describing the most

well-supported model of person perception (Stereotype Content Model), and how the core components of this model are thought to relate to moral judgments. I will then argue that the underemphasis of these “intellectual virtues” results from a tendency to see the moral virtues as other-oriented and the intellectual virtues as self-oriented. This distinction, however, might be dependent on a prioritization of short-term interests as compared to long-term interests in orienting ourselves to others. Specifically, I will suggest ways in which the behavior promoted by the “intellectual virtues” might be equally important to other-oriented outcomes. As such, intellectual virtues might be relevant to evaluations of moral character that consider long-term outcomes, and their importance might not be reflected in individuals’ first impressions of interaction partners. In other words, the relevance of competence-based traits to moral character may track the impact that those traits have on others’ well-being. Since ultimate human flourishing requires societies composed of individuals who are both warm and competent, the moral relevance of competence will increase as perspective shifts from the short term to the long term. I will conclude with suggestions for how moral cognition could benefit from the study of the processes underlying the intellectual virtues.

Person perception and moral character

Research in person perception has identified two broad dimensions of social cognition that guide our global impressions of others, as well as our emotional and behavioral responses to interaction partners: warmth and competence (Fiske et al. 2007). Some form of these two dimensions can be traced back throughout much of the literature in social cognition, though they have taken on different labels depending on the particular theory. For example, Rosenberg et al. (1968) instructed participants to sort 64 trait words into categories that were likely to be found in another person. These participants generated two orthogonal dimensions of person perception: *intellectual good/bad* (defined by traits such as determined, industrious, skillful, intelligent), and *social good/bad* (defined by traits such as warm, honest, helpful, sincere)—two dimensions that are conceptually similar to *warmth* and *competence*. Recent research in face perception has also demonstrated the ease and speed with which participants

will judge *trustworthiness* and *competence* from short exposures to faces (Todorov et al. 2006; Willis and Todorov 2006)—again, two dimensions that overlap significantly, if not completely, with warmth and competence.

These dimensions reflect basic and adaptive categories of evaluations: the need to anticipate actors' intentions toward oneself (warmth) and the need to anticipate an actor's ability to act on their intentions (competence). In other words, these evaluations allow us to answer the questions "Does the other intend help or harm?" and "can the other carry out this intent?" (Cuddy et al. 2008).

Though this distinction in the literature on person perception maps very closely onto the two separate categories of virtues identified by philosophers (intellectual vs. moral), theorists have drawn a sharp divide between the moral relevance of these traits. Put simply, traits that communicate warmth are morally relevant, while traits that communicate competence are not. Virtue ethicists, on the other hand, see merit not only in character traits associated with what most contemporary models of person perception identify as "warmth," but also in traits identifiable as relevant to "competence" (intelligence, fortitude, perseverance, skill; c.f. Dent 1975; Sherman 1989).

This moral distinction is evident throughout much of the literature in social cognition and is presumed to be due to the self- versus other-focused nature of the traits associated with each dimension. Traits related to warmth, such as friendliness, honesty, and kindness, tend to motivate other-oriented behavior (e.g. altruism), whereas traits associated with competence, such as efficacy, perseverance, creativity, and intelligence, tend to motivate self-oriented behavior (e.g. practicing a skill; Peeters 2001). Indeed, past theories that have posited a similar kind of two-dimensional approach to person perception have made the distinction more explicit by using the labels of "morality" and "competence" to describe the two kinds of evaluations (Phalet and Poppe 1997). Some work even conceptualizes these two domains as operating in tension with one another, arguing that traits promoting other-oriented concerns interfere with the development of traits promoting self-interest, and vice versa (Schwartz 1992).

Why this asymmetry in the moral relevance between self- versus other-focused traits? One possible interpretation is that perceivers value other-oriented traits because they are thought to be more likely to directly benefit

themselves. Warmth motivates others to care for us whereas behaviors motivated by others' competence do not seem to directly impact our fortunes. The kinds of appraisals that are thought to underlie judgments of warmth and competence seem to corroborate such an interpretation. Specifically, evaluations of *competition* and *status* have been found to predict the degree to which individuals judge others to be competent and warm, respectively. I will discuss these in turn.

Individuals and groups are "competitive" if they have goals that are perceived to be incompatible with the goals of the perceiver. For example, competitive others would desire to maximize their own resources at the expense of others' ability to acquire resources. These assessments inform our judgments of others' social intents, carving the social world up into those who intend to facilitate the achievement of our own goals, and those who seem to have no such intention. Perceptions of warmth follow directly from this evaluation.

Appraisals of "competition" track closely to group membership. Because ingroup members tend not to compete with a perceiver for resources (though this may vary depending upon the ingroup in question), they are judged to be low in competitiveness and therefore trigger perceptions of warmth, while outgroup members are judged to be higher in competitiveness and, therefore, colder. Similar effects would be expected regardless of the dimensions along which group membership is perceived. Perceived similarity to another is dynamically evaluated along multiple dimensions of identity (Tversky 1977). Any such perceived similarity should trigger appraisals of low competition and high warmth. In sum, targets with whom we share identity, and consequently from whom we can expect to benefit, are considered to be high in warmth. These considerations, in turn, determine perceptions of moral character.

Evaluations of the "status" of individuals and groups inform judgments of competence given the assumption that status is a reliable indicator of ability. The degree to which an individual is capable of pursuing and achieving her goals is presumed to be reflected in their place in society. As such, high-status targets are judged to be more highly competent than low-status targets. These considerations are not considered to be morally relevant.

Taking the effect of status and competition on person perception together, it seems that the moral relevance of a trait is largely defined by the degree to which that trait motivates behavior that confers benefits on anyone other than

the actor—in other words, behavior that is more likely to bring about behavior that profits the self.

The valence of the emotional responses to targets categorized along these dimensions supports this view. The stereotype content model posits specific sets of emotional responses triggered by the various combinations of these two dimensions and, in thinking about their relevance to moral judgments, it is instructive to examine the content of these emotions. The perception of both warmth and competence in targets elicits primarily admiration from others (Cuddy et al. 2008). These individuals are evaluated as having goals that are compatible with those of the perceiver, and they have the skills requisite to help perceivers achieve those goals. In other words, individuals high in both warmth and competence are our most socially valued interaction partners. The perception of warmth without competence elicits pity, competence without warmth triggers envy, and the absence of both triggers contempt and disgust (Cuddy et al. 2008).

The organization of these emotional responses with regard to self- versus other-benefiting actions also squares nicely with recent research showing the paradoxical nature of perceiver's responses to moral behavior on the part of individuals perceived to have traits that seem similar to warmth or competence (Pavarini and Schnall, this volume). Admiration is elicited in response to the moral behavior of warm (i.e. low competition) others, while the same behavior by those considered to be low in warmth (i.e. high competition) elicits envy.

Indeed, the fact that perceivers discount the moral relevance of competence traits relative to warmth traits could be a simple function of an ingroup bias. We have negative emotional responses toward outgroup competent others, because they might not be favorably oriented *towards us*. The bias against the importance of general competence in judgments of moral character, compared to general warmth, seems to be a reflection of a self-interested motivation to maximize the likelihood of resource acquisition. Evidence in line with this interpretation shows that perceivers value competence more positively in close others ("a close friend") compared to less close others ("distant peers"). Though warmth judgments still carry more weight in predicting positivity toward others compared to competence, competence only becomes relevant to character when it is perceived to have consequences for the self (Abele and

Wojciszke 2007). For example, the positivity of an employee's evaluations of his boss tracks competence only when the employee's fate is tied to the decisions of the boss.

Competence as long-term other-orientation

Literature on person perception has largely agreed that, while evaluation of others proceeds along both dimensions, warmth holds primacy over competence. The rationale for such an asymmetry in value has typically been explained as follows: "From an evolutionary perspective, the primacy of warmth makes sense because another's intent for good or ill matters more to survival than whether the other can act on those goals" (Cuddy et al., p. 89). These kinds of statements imply that warmth and competence differ in their immediate relevance to a perceiver's well-being. As such, the importance of a trait to judgments of others' character is proportional to the relevance of that trait to one's own survival. Though there seems to be no dispute that warmth is more relevant to immediate survival, could it be that competence has similar consequences as time passes? Could it be that the behaviors motivated by competence, though they do not benefit others in the short term, benefit others in the long term? This section will argue (a) that competence-related traits in targets do increase the likelihood of benefits to perceivers over the long term and (b) that evidence arguing for the relevance of warmth to character judgment might be failing to detect the importance of competence to character evaluations because of its focus on evaluations of short-term impressions. The final section will argue for the importance of incorporating how people assess competence in general—and over time—into the study of moral cognition, as well as offer some initial ways in which this pursuit might move forward.

Though warmth in interaction partners might matter more for achieving the short-term interests of perceivers, there are reasons to believe that long-term benefits would depend on valuing the competent as well. Indeed, the argument for the importance of traits that cultivate individual skills becomes even more central to others' long-term well-being if you consider the unit of analysis to be the group as opposed to the individual.

The idea that groups flourish when individuals are motivated to pursue their own interests is not new. Adam Smith argued in the *Wealth of Nations* for the pursuit of immediate self-interest as the key to flourishing societies. His theorizing on the power of free markets suggests that it is precisely the drive for self-interest through which societies advance. This idea was captured in Smith's metaphor of the *invisible hand*: collective well-being is best achieved by groups of individuals who pursue their own advancement without concern for others. The engine of this process is *specialization*. Focusing individuals' efforts on skills/domains in which they have a comparative advantage ultimately benefits a community by maximizing the collective capabilities of group members, allowing for a potentially wider and richer distribution of resources as well as a competitive advantage relative to other groups. Consequently, cultivating traits that foster such an end may ultimately benefit the community by enhancing the collective competence of a population.

This argument assumes that collective value is, at least in part, created by self-focused motivational states associated with competence-based traits. Indeed, I largely agree with Smith's sentiment that "by pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it" (Smith 1776/1937).

That said, societal flourishing cannot be achieved through these kinds of motivations alone. Specialization only pays off when a collective defined by the free-flowing *exchange* of resources has been established. In other words, societies flourish when composed of individuals who (a) maximize their individual potential in terms of skills/abilities and (b) are willing to exchange those resources with others. What drives this willingness? Smith initially offers a strong answer: "it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, brewer or baker that we should expect our dinner, but from a regard for their self-interest." The argument put forward in this paper, however, suggests an alternative. It is not solely through regard to self-interest that people in groups should expect the beneficence of others—it is *also* through the benevolence of the butcher, brewer, and baker. Societies composed of the warm and the competent should ultimately thrive, and structural and legal constraints should reflect the collective value inherent in both traits.

A critical insight provided by sociobiology has been the adaptive value of other-interested drives—those that cultivate perceptions of warmth in others.

If competence-based traits motivate behaviors that contribute to specialization, then warmth-based traits motivate behaviors that contribute to the desire to exchange the fruits of such specialization. A balance of these motivations maximizes long-term well-being. Societies composed of individuals with intentions to act warmly toward others as well as the capacity to act on those intentions will best achieve long-term collective well-being. Theories arguing for the importance of competence without warmth ignore the social function of other-interested states (particularly their role in mediating the emergence of reciprocal altruism, c.f. Trivers 1971), and those arguing for the importance of warmth without competence ignore the importance of the process through which individual resources contribute to collective value. Other-interested motivations solidify social groups by establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships and by providing the proximal mechanisms that motivate the exchange of resources individuals have accrued. As such, the traits that underlie perceptions of warmth and competence are essential in the ultimate creation of flourishing societies.

This perspective fits well with the finding that person perceivers admire those who are both warm and competent: these are the kinds of individuals who ultimately contribute to the flourishing of social groups. It also fits well with the finding that people think warmth is morally relevant, since immediate and long-term intentions will have consequences for the self. It raises the question, however, as to whether people also think that, under some circumstances, competence can also speak to moral character (c.f. Valdesolo and DeSteno 2011).

Because competence-based traits in targets might, over time, increase the likelihood of benefits to perceivers, and because this seems to be a crucial criterion for evaluating another's character, then it's possible that competence traits might take on more importance for moral character over the long term. Importantly, the effect of competence on perceived character might operate independently from perceptions of warmth. Smith draws a distinction between the efficacy of promoting societal interest incidentally (through focusing on the self) or intentionally (through focusing on others). For the purposes of judging moral character, it's possible that judgments are sensitive to not just the likelihood that traits will have immediate positive effects on well-being, but perhaps also whether traits will have long-term positive effects on well-being. It is neither

surprising nor particularly controversial to argue for the moral relevance of other-interested traits to those who study social, or moral, cognition. But it is indeed a departure from the norm to posit the moral relevance of competence-based traits.

Those who might worry that this argument champions the moral value of self-focused states over other-focused states need not worry. It does not challenge the view that perceptions of warmth will always remain morally relevant to perceivers. Instead, it simply proposes a change in the relative moral relevance of warmth and competence judgments as a function of the time horizon over which these judgments are made. As perspective shifts from the short to the long term, and the effects of being surrounded by the competent become more tangible, competence traits might have a greater impact on judgments of character. Suggestive evidence of this idea comes from work evaluating the traits displayed by moral exemplars (Frimer et al. 2011; Frimer et al. 2012). Twenty-five recipients of a national award for extraordinary volunteerism were compared to 25 demographically matched comparison participants with the specific aim of comparing the degree to which these moral exemplars displayed traits associated with both *agency* (i.e. competence) and *communion* (i.e. warmth). Results suggested that exemplars were consistently higher not only in communion but also in agency, as well as in the tendency to incorporate both these core dimensions into their personality. In particular, this work provides an empirical basis for why competence should be included in the study of moral psychology.

One response to this argument might be that if it were the case that competence traits are relevant to moral judgments, there would be more evidence of it in person perception and moral cognition. Much of the research into the two dimensions of person perception relies on perceivers “spontaneous” interpretations of behavior or “impressions” of others (c.f. Cuddy et al. 2008, p. 73). Studies of person perception deal with immediate evaluations of others’ character—snap decisions based off minimal amounts of information. If judgments of others’ moral character are tied to inferences about the degree to which another’s behaviors might profit the self, then it follows that we should assess others’ character along dimensions of warmth during first impressions. Someone’s competence is less immediately relevant to well-being compared to whether they desire to hurt or harm you.

In this context, warmth might be more central to character judgments only because it is the most obviously other-oriented dimension of perception. However, in contexts where perceivers are judging the importance of cultivating particular traits over the long term, competence might become more central to character judgments. This idea leads to quite simple and testable predictions about how the composition of our evaluations of moral character might change depending on the time horizon under consideration. In the same way that men and women have been found to value different traits when judging the attractiveness of potential short- versus long-term relationship partners, perceivers might value different traits when judging the character of short-versus long-term interaction partners. Characteristics such as efficiency, perseverance, and determination might be considered more morally relevant in contexts when the behaviors that those traits motivate are more relevant to outcomes for the perceiver.

Previous work, as described earlier, has shown that competence becomes more relevant to people's global evaluations of others as their fate becomes more tied to the target (Wocjiske and Abele 2008); however, no study to my knowledge has examined the consequences of these kinds of fate-dependence manipulations on moral judgments. In line with the idea that evaluations of character seem yoked to the degree to which individuals see others as helping facilitate their goals, fate dependence might have an impact on character judgments via inferences of competence.

Indeed, there is already evidence suggesting that competence traits form an important part of one's own moral identity. Recent studies of the composition of moral identity find that adjectives such as "hardworking" are considered central to the moral self and predictive of moral cognition and behavior (Aquino and Reed 2002). This makes the discounting of such traits in others' character even more interesting and worthy of research. Why is it that most existing theories of person perception define "moral" traits as orthogonal to traits rooted in competence, even though we seem to readily acknowledge the moral value of competence for the self? The relative weight given to warmth and competence in defining the moral identity of the self and others could be another interesting avenue to test the degree to which judgments of character depend on the self-interested preference for traits that help achieve one's goals.

In sum, if the import, and perceived moral relevance, of warmth traits is due to the immediacy of the effects of such traits on others' well-being, then it may be the case that competence-related traits would increase in importance, and moral relevance, if the decision context were framed differently. Though someone's industriousness might not matter for immediate evaluations of moral character, such a trait might take on moral meaning if participants felt, for example, that their fate were connected to this individual in some way over the long term.

New direction for moral cognition

This perspective suggests several interesting avenues for future research in the study of moral cognition, judgment, and behavior. First, it implies that the centrality of traits to moral character during person perception might be distinct from those considered central to one's own moral identity. The moral relevance of competence-related traits to one's own identity, but not others, speaks to this possibility. What other differences might there be?

More generally, what are the processes underlying assessments of others' abilities to carry out their goals? To what degree do we weight an individual's determination, grit, or perseverance in assessing moral character and under what conditions? Does it matter if they are ingroup or outgroup members? Does it matter whether we are making judgments that seem to only have immediate or also long-term implications for the self?

Two current areas of interest in moral psychology to which this perspective might be fruitfully applied include (1) work testing the role of intent and outcome on moral judgments, and (2) the relationship between mind perception and moral judgment. With regard to the former, work from the lab of Fiery Cushman (Cushman 2008; Cushman et al. 2009) has posited two processes along which moral evaluations proceed: one which is sensitive to the causal relationship between an agent and an outcome, and the other which is sensitive to the mental states responsible for that action. It is tempting to see processes associated with the former as relevant to competence-based evaluations. An individual's ability to achieve a goal (competence) might serve as input into a determination of whether an agent is, or is likely to be,

causally responsible for morally relevant outcomes, whereas an individual's intentions for harming or helping others (warmth) might be more directly related to determinations of the mental states of actors. Given that this research identifies distinct patterns in moral judgments associated with evaluations of intent and causal connection, it is possible that inferences of competence and warmth might show similar patterns of relationships to particular kinds of moral judgments. For example, causal responsibility seems to be more directly relevant to judgments of punishment and blame while intent matters more for judgments of wrongness or permissibility. Might the moral relevance of perceived warmth and competence follow a similar pattern? Could perceiving general competence in individuals make them more morally blameworthy for outcomes?

In exploring this possibility it would be important to distinguish how competence judgments might influence moral evaluations of behavior (responsibility, intent, blame) from moral evaluations of character (how good/bad is this person). It may be that interesting patterns of responses emerge from considering these kinds of moral judgments separately. A distinction between act-centered models of moral judgment and person-centered models of moral judgment has recently been emphasized in the literature (e.g. Pizarro and Tannenbaum 2011). On this account, moral judgments are often formed by considering the moral character of the individual involved. And assessments of intent, control, responsibility, and blame might be unified in their relationships to underlying assessments of "who the actor is and what he or she values" (Pizarro and Tannenbaum).

The second area of research in moral cognition for which the moral relevance of competence might have interesting implications is recent theorizing on the relationship between mind perception and morality (Gray et al. 2007, 2012). These theories posit that all moral judgments require perceiving two distinct kinds of interacting minds: agents and patients. Agents have the capacity to intend and carry out action, while patients are the recipients of agents' actions. Interestingly, *agents* are defined by traits that seem more conceptually associated with competence (self-control, planning, thought) but also "morality." In models of mind perception the distinction between warmth and competence in terms of moral competence seems to disappear. How can theories of person perception, which draw a sharp

distinction between morally relevant capacities of warmth and the amoral capacities of competence, be reconciled with emerging theories of mind perception in moral psychology? As I have argued throughout this paper, the answer may be that the distinction drawn in person perception is misleading and, perhaps, a function of the contexts in which such studies have been conducted.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter serves as a call for increased attention toward the processes underlying the evaluation of others' competence in moral judgments of them and, consequently, renewed attention to the role of such traits in theories of morality more generally. Moral cognition has focused almost exclusively on traits related to warmth (kindness, altruism, trustworthiness) and has paid relatively little attention to how we assess others' capacities to achieve their goals. These self-focused traits—discipline, focus, industriousness—have long been considered relevant to moral character by virtue ethicists, and their absence from psychological theories of person perception is, at the very least, worthy of more direct empirical attention.

Note

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