Chapter 2

Toward a Postmodern Psychology of Moral Action and Moral Development

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In the past decade, radical changes have occurred in our understanding of the character of moral beliefs, precepts, and prescriptions, and how these are or can be justified. Profound changes have also taken place in our view of the nature of scientific inquiry, particularly in the human sciences, and how scientific knowledge claims can be justified. These changes reflect a larger transition between two very different ways of comprehending ourselves and our world: the modern and postmodern epochs. A book such as this can play a role in deciding the direction that psychology takes in this time of transition, through reflection upon the framework to which we have become accustomed. An appreciation of the need for such reflection in the sciences of humanity can be seen in the growing frequency of metatheoretical analysis (e.g., Fiske & Shweder, 1986; Stam, Rogers, & Gergen, 1987).

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Such metatheoretical discourse considers how we have come to ask the questions we ask in our consideration of psychological phenomena; what background assumptions we take for granted in our inquiry and what, on the other hand, is overlooked; what persistent problems hamper our investigations; and what are the likely results of modifying our course of inquiry.

These are the kinds of questions I try to answer in this chapter. My intention is to question central assumptions we have about the way moral values are sanctioned, or warranted, or justified as reasonable. I shall try to show that even positions as generally opposed as social learning theory and cognitive-developmentalism take it for granted that moral values can be justified only by appeal to some fixed characteristics of human nature, such as the supposedly fixed and universal characteristics of human reasoning. It is further presumed that only a single, universal morality can receive this kind of objective justification, and that if such a justification proves impossible, then moral relativism or nihilism is the consequence. My thesis is that these assumptions about morality and its justification are false, and that they hinder our progress in psychology. They were first adopted in the Enlightenment, the social, political, and intellectual project initiated in the 1600s, which created what was until recently an unquestioned way of understanding the world and our place in it: the “modern” view. The Enlightenment involved a project of ethical justification that defined the terms in which morality has been understood and investigated for the past 300 years.

The first section of this chapter outlines this project of ethical justification. Because assumptions about morality went hand in hand with assumptions about human nature, reason, the relationship between facts and values, and the character of legitimate scientific knowledge, we must consider these as well. Thus, we must pay some attention to classical and medieval ethics, and to the Enlightenment’s second project, that of justifying scientific knowledge claims. The argument I review is that the project of ethical justification proved to be impossible, not because of any lack of skill or agility on the part of those engaged in it, but because the character of morality, and the role it has traditionally played in human affairs and human conduct, is such that the kind of justification that was sought proves, on reflection, impossible. The very terms in which the Enlightenment’s ethical project was framed made its downfall inevitable.

The second section of the chapter concerns the way two major approaches to the psychology of moral development—social learning theory and cognitive-developmentalism—have accepted the Enlightenment’s definition of morality. Each assumes that either morality has an objective foundation, or it has no justification at all. The difference is that cognitive-developmentalists claim to have identified such a foundation, whereas social learning theorists treat morality as having no objective foundation, and thus nothing more than the expression of subjective preferences.
What are the consequences of the failure of the Enlightenment's ethical project? The apparent absence of any objective foundation to ethics has had profound consequences, both intellectual and social. We have been left with a misunderstanding of the kind of being we are, and of the kinds of life we should live. But these consequences are not inevitable. In fact, they follow from continued acceptance of the original assumptions that lay behind the Enlightenment project. This being so, we must try to reshape the perspective from which we comprehend morality, and the terms in which we conceive it. When we do this, the outlines of a different kind of ethical justification become apparent, one that legitimates multiple objective moralities rather than a universal moral system. In the final section, I briefly consider what is being done along these lines by contemporary philosophers of ethics, in the context of some suggestions about the shape a postmodern approach to psychological inquiry might take, once inappropriate foundational assumptions have been relinquished.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECTS

The historical period that came to be called the Enlightenment was a time of rebellion against the authority of church and state. Scientific developments, first in astronomy and then in mechanics, were throwing doubt on centuries of teaching. Political uprisings and dissent were frequent, despite the repression with which they were met. Traditional doctrines and values were subjected to harsh, unsympathetic scrutiny. In particular, theological modes of inquiry were rejected in favor of emphases on empirical science as a model form of inquiry, on the systematic use of reason, and on the individual as a valid seeker of knowledge and as the proper focus of the social and political orders. Each of these new views contrasted in key respects with the classical and medieval counterparts. A new view of reason and inquiry was developing, pitting empirically informed reason against scholastic speculation, causal explanation against teleological metaphysics, and the natural dignity and capacities of the individual against a theological hierarchy that placed man higher than beasts but lower than angels.

New Views of Empirical Science

During the seventeenth century, people witnessed startling and revolutionary successes in novel forms of empirical inquiry. Galileo was one among many who were strikingly successful at explaining both earthly and celestial phenomena in ways totally at odds with the Catholic Church's teaching. The Church had been promulgating a view of the universe, based on biblical exegesis and classical Greek texts, that emphasized a fundamental distinction between earthly and celestial phenomena. It also employed teleological explanations of natural movements, these too taken from classical Greek philosophy.

According to Aristotle's physics, all entities on the earth are composed of four fundamental elements: earth, air, fire, and water (Cohen, 1985; Evans, 1964). Each element has a natural place in the sphere beneath the moon: earth at the center, water in a sphere surrounding the earth, air surrounding water, and fire as another concentric sphere below the moon. In the absence of external influence, each element returns to its natural place. Accordingly, the proportion of the elements in a body determines whether it is heavy or light, so every object has a natural motion, an intrinsic tendency to move to its natural position. Heavy objects move toward the center of the earth; light objects move upward. Stones drop to the ground; rain falls to earth; gas bubbles up in a lake; flames leap upward. In each case, the natural motion of a terrestrial body is a straight line. Unnatural or "violent" motions can be imposed on a body by the application of a force, but linear motion reappears when the force is removed. Physics is the systematic study of natural motions; the unnatural motions brought about by efficient causes, by pushes and pulls, are not amenable to scientific explanation. Physics deals only with the natural order of things.

In this classical account, there is a second realm: that of heavenly objects. These are made from a fifth element, the "aether." The natural motion of such objects is circular, so the heavenly bodies move around the earth in circles. The aether is a perfect and unchanging material; the planets, sun, and moon are like eternal diamonds. In contrast, terrestrial objects and their elements are corruptible, marked by constant alteration and change.

The classical Greek texts in which this physics was articulated had been lost when the Roman empire collapsed, around the fifth century. In the twelfth century, the texts were rediscovered in Arabic translation and retranslated into Latin. The Catholic Church soon incorporated Aristotelian notions into the teaching it had been conducting around biblical exegesis. St. Thomas Aquinas is the most famous systematizer and unifier of these two traditions, the classical and the Christian. Scholastic physics (along with a classical ethics I shall consider shortly) became central to the curriculum of the new European universities. Aristotle's two-sphere model of the universe was adopted and adapted. In the Thomist version, the earth is the center of the universe, surrounded by the spheres of the moon, sun, and other planets. In addition, Paradise lies beyond the sphere of the stars, while the circles of Hell lie inside the earth; this portrayal had clearly taken on a symbolic Christian meaning: "The universe of spheres mirrors both man's hope and his fate. Both physically and spiritually man occupies a crucial intermediate position in this universe" (Kuhn, 1957, p. 112).
Many elements of Thomist physics were rejected by proponents of the seventeenth-century’s new science, most famously the heliocentric model of planetary motion. The Church’s claims that earthly and celestial realms contained different kinds of matter, manifested different natural motions, and thus were governed by different laws, proved no longer tenable. The new astronomy was able to show, for example, that the earth and the heavens have remarkable similarities. Through his telescope, Galileo saw craters on the moon, proving it is not a perfect sphere, as both Aristotle’s physics and the Thomist account had claimed. Newton was able to show that local and planetary phenomena could be described in terms of the same laws of motion and gravitational attraction. Thus, general laws based on empirical observation, not on metaphysical speculation, became the norm.

The Systematic Use of Reason

Enlightenment philosophers also rejected the view of the character and aims of reason that the Catholic Church had adopted from Aristotle. In the Thomist system, events had final causes that could be identified by reason alone, rather than by empirical inquiry. The Enlightenment thinkers disagreed strongly. Reason, they argued, cannot supply genuine knowledge about powers and essences, about the final causes and the final ends of physical motion. All these are speculative metaphysical notions, neither identifiable through reflection nor accessible to empirical observation. Metaphysical speculation should be swept away for all time. Reason, informed by observation, can only identify proximal causes. Reason is calculative, dealing with matters of fact and with mathematical relations.

With these changes, the scope of reason became smaller. Many of our beliefs turn out (in this account) not to be rationally justifiable, but based merely on custom or habit. Causal relationships, for example, are merely repetitive associations of successive events (Hume’s famous skeptical argument). With the rejection of Scholasticism, reason became more specialized and more powerful, but more limited in its range of application.

Emphasis on the Individual

It is not an exaggeration to say that in the seventeenth century the “individual” was invented (“a new social and cultural artifact” along with the parasol, suggests MacIntyre, 1988, p. 339). For the first time, man (woman was still generally excluded) was considered to have an existence and characteristics prior to and separate from particular social roles. The new science itself seemed to be an activity where individuals were making discoveries through their own observation and reasoning, with no reference to tradition or faith. Indeed, what they discovered disclosed prejudice and dogma in centuries of instruction by the Church. In this early science, a new view of knowledge took roots, one that placed central emphasis on the power and validity of individual reasoning and observation. For the first time, accounts of knowledge, human nature, and morality centered on the individual, distinct from the context of a culture or tradition, or a superhuman deity. The individual was now considered a legitimate source of knowledge, distinct from and superior to the authority of the church and the monarchy. The individual modern self, so the account went, had been liberated from theological faith and confused teleological thinking into a proper autonomy of reflection and empirical investigation.

SCIENTIFIC AND MORAL JUSTIFICATION

The Enlightenment intellectuals defined for themselves and their successors two projects, one dealing with scientific reason and knowledge of the material world, the second with practical reason and knowledge of the social and moral world. To fully understand the way we, at the end of the twentieth century, view both science and ethics—and the relationship between these two—we need to look closely at the character and history of these projects. In each case, the aim was to identify an objective foundation that would justify claims to valid knowledge or values, respectively, without reference to divine ordinance or speculative metaphysics.

The Rational Justification of Scientific Knowledge

The first project called for examination of the method of scientific inquiry and an account of its essential features, to characterize the manner of inquiry appropriate to matters of fact. More precisely, the aim was to identify the means by which an individual can achieve valid and justified knowledge of the physical universe and its material objects, and thereby to provide a rational foundation on which to ground scientific knowledge claims. The story of the ultimately unsuccessful efforts to achieve this foundation is beyond the scope of this paper, but a brief overview will help outline the parallels between this project and the second one, and will provide background to the later discussion of alternative interpretations of the proper character of a scientific psychology.

Efforts to provide a rational justification for the new science of individual empirical investigation took the task of trying to identify an interpretation-free origin to which all kinds of valid scientific knowledge could be traced. Two main candidates were proposed: basic sensory elements or brute facts that could be observed in a manner independent of prior theory (Locke, Hume), and self-evident principles that would frame the content of
scientific theories (Descartes, Kant). In our own century, the assumption that valid scientific knowledge rests on a twin foundation of objective facts and axiomatic principles motivated the Vienna Circle’s logical positivism, and it continues to the present day in “cognitive empiricist” programs (Toulmin’s phrase) in psychology. In the positivist account of proper scientific investigation, modern logic provides formal rewriting rules that operate on value-neutral and interpretation-free observation statements. Validity is guaranteed by the consistency and completeness of the logical syntax and the objectivity of the observational data. Unfortunately, logic may be neither consistent nor complete (Nagel & Newman, 1958), and regardless, it is arbitrary and conventional. Also, the observations making up the empirical component turn out to be theory laden and organized by our human technological concerns (Kuhn, 1970).

In cognitive science, the digital computer today provides a root metaphor for human action and cognition, one that still reflects the view that knowledge is founded in logic and facts. Bits of information are input, stored, and transformed by algorithmic procedures that implement basic logical operations. Neither data items nor programs involve interpretation. If such a scheme were to successfully model a nontrivial aspect of human functioning, this would be strong support for the Enlightenment’s epistemology. Present evidence gives no sign that this is likely.

The Rational Justification of Moral Knowledge

For the Enlightenment thinkers, science and philosophy dealt with moral issues as much as with epistemological ones. The second project called for justification of the forms of practical reasoning that guide action, a justification parallel to that sought for scientific knowledge. The aim was to provide a rational account of the character and status of moral norms and rules, one that would rest no longer on religious authority or claims of a divinely revealed truth, but would reflect the power of the individual’s capacity for reasoning.

The Enlightenment philosophers shared a sense of the kind of moral justification they were seeking. It would characterize some key feature(s) of human nature, and then lay out the rational considerations that would be universally compelling to a being with such a nature, that is, the precepts of action that one would expect such a being to accept (MacIntyre, 1984). The certification of moral beliefs, claims, values, and injunctions was to take the form of principles that were binding because they were rationally inescapable, given the nature of our constitution. The elements central to the task were, then, a view of reason, an account of human nature, and an understanding of the moral precepts that were to be justified.

There was surprising agreement about the content of the morality to be justified. All the contributors to the project (Kierkegaard, Kant, Diderot, Hume, Smith, and the rest) considered that the precepts constituting genuine morality involved marriage and the family, promise keeping and justice, respect for life and property. All these were taken over uncritically from a shared Christian past. Thus, the content of their various ethical theories remained an unquestioned conservative individualism, despite the disparate ways of justifying it (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 47). The radical aspect of the project lay not in its content, but in its seeking a rational, rather than theological, certification for the moral order. To abandon theological justification, however, there was a move away from reference to the ends of action and of human life, just as teleological accounts of natural phenomena were rejected as speculative and unscientific. Although the Enlightenment moral scheme retained much of the content of Thomist ethics, it excluded the teleological structure that had been appropriated from Aristotle. This proved to be anything but a minor modification. The teleological features of classical ethics were not a chance matter; they reveal the social and educational role ethics played in classical Greek times.

Classical Ethics

Aristotle held that “Every craft and every inquiry, and similarly every action and project, seems to aim at some good; hence the good has been well defined as that at which everything aims.” Just as he described objects as having a natural place that they sought out in their motion, so he described men as having final ends that they endeavored to achieve through their action. This account reflected the social reality of his time. The Greek city states were small, close-knit communities within which there was consensus about the character and purpose of social roles such as citizen, warrior, philosopher, and slave. Accordingly, Aristotle’s ethics is a teleological one: A man is virtuous when he adequately fulfills the requirements of the role into which he was born. For the flute player, playing tunefully is the final end; for the shoemaker, it is making shoes that are strong and comfortable; for the warrior, it is fearlessness in battle; for the slave, obedience to the master. And man, too, has a final end, a telos. “Man” is what we would now call a functional concept: He is a being with an essential nature and an essential purpose or function. What is uniquely human, distinguishing man from the animals, is logos. Logos has generally been translated as “reason” (although we shall see that another translation may be more appropriate). The right and appropriate exercise of logos leads man to the proper end toward which, as human being, he is directed (and from this, we should note, woman was excluded, along with the slave and the barbarian).
Just as Aristotle's description of objects moving to their natural resting places seems a puzzling kind of physics to anyone accustomed to modern mechanics, until recently his ethics has also seemed an anachronism. Thomas Kuhn described his struggle to comprehend the apparent absurdities in Aristotle's accounts of the behavior of bodies, and his sudden realization that Aristotle's subject "was changed-of-quality in general, including both the fall of a stone and the growth of a child to adulthood" (Kuhn, 1977, p. xi). The primary ontological entities were not material bodies, but the elements and other "qualities which, when imposed on some portion of omnipresent neutral matter, constituted an individual body or substance. Position . . . was . . . a quality in Aristotle's physics, and a body that changed its position therefore remained the same body only in the problematic sense that the child is the individual it becomes" (p. xii). In the same way, Aristotle's ethics had a focus unlike that of most contemporary ethical inquiries. Aristotle's teleological account of human life was tied directly to the hierarchical structure and roles of the Greek polis. Classical ethics was not a detached, theoretical kind of inquiry; it was the discipline that enabled a person to know how to become what he could, and should be, to fulfill his place in the polis. Ethics had political import; it showed how to correct, improve, and educate the citizens. Central to Aristotle's ethics was the notion of "virtue," something that has until recently seemed an antiquated moral concept. Virtues such as courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, pride, good temper, truthfulness, ready wit, friendliness, modesty, and righteous indignation are states of character that make a man good, and make him do his own work well (Aristotle, 1980, p. 37).

At the same time, natural virtue and virtue in the strict sense are distinct, and it is here that the developmental and educational function of ethics appears. Children may have the natural disposition for moral qualities, but without logos, their expression can be "evidently hurtful" (Aristotle, p. 157). Moral precepts are needed to encourage the virtues and discourage the vices, to order and educate the desires and emotions, and to cultivate appropriate habits of action. "It is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, or practically wise without moral virtue" (p. 158). Practical wisdom involves knowledge of the generally accepted rules of morality and an intelligent understanding of their reasons. A moral education, guided by the authority of just law, is essential: 

It is difficult to get from youth up a right training for virtue if one has not been brought up under right laws; for to live temperately and hardly is not pleasant to most people, especially when they are young. For this reason their nurture and occupations should be fixed by law; for they will not be painful when they have become customary. (p. 271)

The good life made no sense out of the setting of society and its laws:

If (as we have said) the man who is to be good must be well trained and habituated, and go on to spend his time in worthy occupations and neither willingly nor unwillingly do bad actions, and if this can be brought about if men live in accordance with a sort of reason and right order, provided this has force . . . the law has compulsive power, while it is at the same time a rule proceeding from a sort of practical wisdom and reason. (p. 272)

This ethical scheme had three interconnecting elements: a view of human nature in its natural, untutored form, with its natural virtues and its faculties and passions; an understanding of the right moral precepts and laws; and a view of the moral end, that is, the "states of character" that characterize a good man. The latter comprises the human telos. As Kuhn discovered, change, including the moral changes required in "the growth of a child to adulthood," was the central subject in Aristotle's philosophy.

Medieval Christianity changed the details but retained the basic structure of Aristotelian ethics: an account of human nature, an understanding of the precepts of rational ethics, and an ethical—developmental telos. Divinely ordained law was tucked onto the ethical precepts, and Aristotle's list of virtues was elaborated to include Christian virtues such as faith, hope, and charity. Conceptions of the telos varied, but the assumption of a proper end to human life was maintained. Aristotle's accounts of virtue and of the human telos were reinterpreted in terms of Christian "natural law": there are norms of human nature as such, but they reflect Adam's original sin, and we are far from realizing human nature as it ought to be. Later in the Middle Ages, the view of the telos altered again; uniquely Christian notions of revelation and salvation were introduced. For Aquinas, for example, the end of human action and the point of moral rules was to achieve goods, to obtain what satisfies our desire. But this was not simple eudaimonism, for "God is good," so that good action aimed to a unity with god. The achievement of human nature as it ought to be was postponed to an afterlife.

The understanding of morality changed radically with the Enlightenment. The "philosophes" (Gay, 1977) had rejected the teleological component of classical physics on the grounds that it was metaphysical and unscientific. In a parallel fashion, they considered classical teleological accounts of human nature to be flawed and unscientific. Just as they considered an appeal to the natural ends of physical motion to be idle speculation, when it came to human activity, they maintained that while human reasoning could identify the means appropriate to a certain course of practical action, it had nothing to say about the ends toward which action—or life—should be directed. What
they failed to see was that this rejection of a human telos undermined the classical purpose and function of ethics. What remained of the three-part scheme of Aristotelian ethics was a view of untaught human nature and a set of moral injunctions that had been stripped of their teleological context. The moral injunctions, both classical and Christian, far from being logically derivable from facts about human nature, had been designed, as we have seen, to bring about changes in that nature. Far from being dictates that all humans could be expected to find rationally compelling, they were prescriptions likely to run counter to human impulses. "The injunctions of morality, thus understood, are likely to be ones that human nature, thus understood, has strong tendencies to disobey" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 55). The Enlightenment modifications to Thomist ethics were of such a kind that the task of demonstrating how moral injunctions could rationally appeal to human nature was from the outset an impossible one. Nonetheless, such a demonstration was seen as central to the project the Enlightenment philosophers undertook. Unwittingly, they initiated ethics' decline from a discipline of practical and educational consequence to one of merely abstract, theoretical academic interest.

Thus, like its sister project for a foundational justification of scientific knowledge, the project of ethical justification ran into insurmountable problems. A succession of brilliant moral philosophers struggled to achieve its goals. Increasingly, they complained of the impossibility of their task, and they argued explicitly that a rational justification of morality is simply not possible. Although they came to appreciate that their task was an impossible one, they drew the wrong conclusions. Instead of questioning the wisdom of an appeal to an objective rational foundation to justify moral precepts, one that rested on facts about a fixed human nature, they concluded that no reasonable ethical justification was possible. With growing frequency, they interpreted morality as rooted instead in whim, preference, or subjective value.

The concerns that found their expression in the Enlightenment projects were noble ones. The political aim to create a new kind of social order in which individuals could improve themselves and participate equally has undoubtedly been powerful and important. With the benefits of hindsight, however, as inheritors of the two projects' conceptual and social progeny, we can appreciate difficulties that the torchbearers of each project failed to anticipate.

**PSYCHOLOGY AND THE FAILURE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECTS**

The psychological study of moral phenomena has lessons to learn from an examination of the Enlightenment's two projects. The first is an appreciation that many of our research programs still adopt unthinkingly the terms in which these projects were conceived. Although they share the terms, they differ in their understanding of where the projects have left us. On the one hand are conceptions of moral action and moral development that not only accept the Enlightenment perspective, but assume that the moral project has been successfully completed. Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental study of moral development is one of these. On the other hand are those programs that tacitly acknowledge the moral project's failure, but fail to see that this means we must rethink our understanding of reason, rather than conclude that morality is entirely a matter of opinion and that everything is relative. Social learning theory is one of these. It is left to the reader to judge what stand other views on moral development, including those presented in this book, take on the success or failure of the Enlightenment's project of ethical justification.

**Kohlberg's Cognitive-Developmental Theory**

Kohlberg's (1971/1981) account of morality has elements very similar to those found in accounts by Locke, Hume, and other moral philosophers engaged in the ethical project. The first element is a largely unquestioned content to morality, this time in the form of universal moral principles. The second is a view of a universal human nature, this time the Piagetian one of an individual who constructs cognitive structures through interaction with the environment, through universal psychological processes of assimilation and accommodation. The third common element is the effort to link these two by means of a rational justification.

Kohlberg claimed that there is wide, perhaps universal, agreement on the content of moral principles. He described empirical evidence that "there is a universal set of moral principles held by people in various cultures, Stage 6" (p. 127) and furthermore "these principles . . . would logically and consistently be held by all people in all societies." Even "the more generalized and consistently held content 'principles' of conventional morality [i.e., Stages 3 and 4] are also universal" (p. 128). Those principles characteristic of Stages 5 or 6 are prudence and respect for authority, society, or people (Stage 5 only); welfare of others; justice; and benevolence (Stage 6 only) (p. 174).

As Harré pointed out, cognitive-developmentalism adopts the morality and politics of individualism. Piaget and Kohlberg presented democratic individualism as though it was a universal empirical truth, an objective statement of the ends of human nature: "Piaget assumes that his own Cartesian logicism is the highest form of human cognition. In similar vein, Kohlberg builds on the assumption that North American colonial democracy is the most advanced form of human association" (Harré, 1984, p. 231). Harré's conclusion is one I am happy to endorse: 'This suggests taking
morally relevant discourse as a text in need of interpretative analysis rather than something for which a literal reading is always available through some supposed shared commonsense understanding" (p. 232).

It might seem that Kohlberg’s account of human “nature” differed significantly from most versions of the Enlightenment project. Isn’t there a telos involved in Kohlberg’s account, an end to human development, just the kind of thing Locke and Hume were determined to avoid? Kohlberg wrote, after all, of the need to move “From Is to Ought.” This is true, but the end is one that an Enlightenment philosopher would have happily sanctioned. The individual becomes a scientist–philosopher, that is, objective, able to consider all factors in their various combinations in a value-neutral manner. He becomes principled, constructing and applying universal and logical ethical principles. The end of development is the autonomous individual that the Enlightenment philosophers invented, and that they claimed we have been all along. The autonomous individual, a seventeenth-century social fiction that had been proclaimed an objective fact about human nature, a construction that has become a social reality of dubious merit in contemporary culture, one that is diagnosed as a uniquely modern malaise (e.g., Durkheim’s state of anomie), becomes in Kohlberg’s stage model the highest form of morality, an inevitable ethical development. “Ethical principles” are the end point of sequential ‘natural’ development in social functioning and thinking” (Kohlberg, 1971/1981, p. 106). Moral development has here all the inevitability of a syllogism. There is a “logical order among the stages” (p. 137); each implies the previous stage but not the succeeding one. “Movement in moral thought is usually irreversibly forward in direction” (p. 137). Education is unnecessary for construction of formal operational intelligence (Piaget claimed not to understand the ‘American question’); nor is ethical instruction or guidance needed for an individual to reach Stage 6. This is a technological teleology, not an Aristotelian one.

To the extent that Kohlberg claimed to have given a clear account of stages of moral development, he claimed also to have provided a rational justification of ethics. Kohlberg’s description of what is accomplished in moral development is exactly what the Enlightenment ethical thinkers were trying to create: a moral system that is binding for every individual, but that makes no reference to external authorities and is independent of the individual’s personal situation and interests. “With each stage, the obligation to preserve human life becomes more categorical, more independent of the aims of the actor, of the commands or opinions of others” (Kohlberg, 1971/1981, p. 171). How are the universal principles and the constructivist nature brought together? According to Kohlberg, by the individual himself. A major impetus for an individual’s transition from one moral stage to the next is a rational recognition of the inadequacies of the current stage. A search for cognitive consistency drives development, and the cognitive consistency of a moral system is essentially a rational justification of that system. Kohlberg acknowledged that “my psychological theory as to why moral development is upward and sequential is broadly the same as my philosophical justification for claiming that a higher stage is more adequate or more moral than a lower stage” (p. 131). What makes the higher stages better? The criteria of structural adequacy in the cognitive-developmental scheme of things are formal ones: increased differentiation and integration. However, morality is “an autonomous domain, with its own criteria of adequacy or rationality,” although these are parallel to the cognitive criteria. A moral reason has formal characteristics of “impersonality, ideality, universalizability, preemp- tiveness and so on” (p. 170). In other words, a fully adequate moral judgment is binding for all. The individual who reaches Stage 6 has finally constructed what the Enlightenment thinkers were trying to find: a morality that is “universal, inclusive, consistent, and grounded on objective, impersonal, or ideal grounds” (p. 170).

Social Learning Theory

If Kohlberg assumed that the Enlightenment project of ethical justification was successful, and proposed that it is recapitulated anew by every individual, social learning theorists assume that the project has failed, and that all moral values and beliefs are relative. Moral action can be studied only as a matter of empirical fact, and moral development is, in truly eudaimonist fashion, a matter of avoiding negative consequences and seeking pleasures.

Social learning theory had its beginnings in twentieth-century positivism, which expressed the stark reality the failed projects seemed to have revealed: reason is logic, facts are neutral data, values are mere preference and opinion. Once values had become considered subjective and un-grounded, ethical relativism was inevitable. And since in this view, moral judgments simply express preferences, moral development has no rational direction beyond the arbitrary norms of one’s social group. People can reinforce any kind of behavior they wish. As Liebert (1984) put it: “Evaluation invariably involves preference, and preference is invariably relative.” Liebert, like Hare (1952/1964), saw no possibility for rational evaluation in moral judgment. The pursuit of self-interest, for the social learning theorist, as for Nietzsche, is all that remains, and such a pursuit results in the development of cunning, not principle.

TOWARD A POSTMODERN PSYCHOLOGY OF MORALITY

If it is to genuinely move beyond false foundational assumptions, the psychological study of moral phenomena must allow itself to be affected in a double way by the failure to identify objective, interpretation-free foundations
upon which to ground scientific and moral knowledge. A science of moral phenomena must rethink both its status as science and the character of its domain of inquiry. Neither of these two is quite what we have assumed it to be. Thomas Kuhn and others have given us a new sense of what science is, free from a foundational metaphysics. They have reinterpreted science in postmodern terms. Scientific research turns out to involve paradigms of inquiry outside which no interpretation of phenomena can take place. However, the science of psychology presents special interpretive problems. Because those parts of psychology that involve the study of human phenomena will never become ‘normal science’ in Kuhn’s (1970) sense, their practitioners must stay constantly aware of the role that perspectives and concerns play in constituting the entities being studied. A science that cannot appeal to the apparently interpretation-free data that a paradigm provides to its scientific practitioners must instead explicitly recognize and come to terms with the unavoidable part that interpretation plays in even the identification of what counts as evidence. A postmodern psychology must have a central hermeneutic component (Packer & Addison, 1989).

A variety of candidates have been proposed for a nonpositivist psychology: humanistic, phenomenological, constructionist, narrative. One way to assess these psychologies is to consider to what extent the Enlightenment framework still holds sway. Does the search continue for a foundation underlying knowledge claims? Or is it assumed instead that no rational justification is possible and that anything goes, that all interpretations are equal, and that selection among competing explanatory accounts is arbitrary?

The interpretive or hermeneutic approach I have outlined elsewhere (Packer, 1985) attempts a radical break with the Enlightenment projects for science and morality. Its domain of inquiry is neither an external realm of objective phenomena nor an internal cognitive realm of mental structures, but everyday practical activity. The source of knowledge is not taken to be interpretation-free facts about the world, observed with detachment, or cognitive principles self-evident to reflection. Inquiry has its starting place in our human understanding of each other, although this is always a partial, perspectival, and incomplete kind of understanding. Furthermore, this understanding is inevitably ‘projective’: We comprehend new phenomena in terms of our practical engagement in the world. We understand the new not in terms of what we already know, but in terms of who we already are. The possible shapes of our understanding are, at least initially, those into which we have been thrown by our history and culture. Interpretive investigation entails a recognition that a projective framework is always at work, but that with effort it can be extended and altered, to bring fresh understanding.

The kind of explanation sought in hermeneutic inquiry is neither a theory made up of general laws that reflect statistically significant regularities among events, nor a rational reconstruction of some portion of a decontextualized cognitive competence. It is instead a narrative account, an interpretation, that articulates and lays out our practical understanding of a phenomenon, organized by the concerns of a particular practical engagement, a task that psychological activity seeks to further and move forward. Interpretive inquiry focuses on human activity, situated in context, and the products of activity, including institutions, histories, and texts. Human understanding traffics in ‘thick concepts’ (Williams, 1985) that meld fact and value; an explanatory account of human action, finding its starting place in understanding, aims to articulate these concepts to a practical end.

This, in brief, is one account of the kind of science psychology can become. What, now, is the appropriate way to approach and understand the phenomena of morality? A hermeneutic approach to moral phenomena introduces changes in both the emphasis and practice of research into morality. First, we must study moral action embedded in the context of social practices. The sources of moral development lie not within the individual (in the mind, or in human nature) or even in the socializing parent–child dyad, but in the social practices within which individuals act. Tradition and culture perpetuate themselves in these practices, but they are also shaped by contemporary material circumstances. Second, moral reasoning is not usually a matter of applying moral principles, analogous to solving math or logical problems: It takes the shape of deliberation about concrete moral issues. Third, if researchers can never be detached onlookers, the relationship between researcher and people studied needs to be reexamined. Let us consider each of these three in more detail, together with some examples of interpretive research that has broken fresh ground in each area.

The Practical Grounds of Morality

Moral acts are not objects that can be simply coded or measured; they must be interpreted. An act may be foolishness or heroism, cowardice or caution, depending on the setting against which it is placed and on the circumstances of both agent and researcher. Oliver North has been described as destroyer of the Constitution, and as heroic defender of democracy. The U.S. Air Force’s shooting down of two Libyan fighters was equally subject to contrasting interpretations. The ambiguity of each of these events has been striking. In what moral category should we place them? It seems that the psychologist’s task is to try to understand the various ways in which such acts are interpreted. Different social practices set up their own facts; each provides an interpretive framework within which acts of right and wrong show up. As psychologists, we should not study these moral facts alone; we must study their framework, and their relation to it. At the same time, the ontological framework we work in, as scientists, shapes what we study: There is a doubly projective structure here.
From the hermeneutic perspective, the sources of morality to which the individual can lay claim, lie neither internal to that individual, as potential cognitive constructions, nor external to the individual, as social norms that must be internalized with the encouragement of authoritarian carrots and sticks. These sources, shall we say, precede and surround the individual, as social practices in which he or she can participate, and as possibilities that the individual can make his or her own. It is by becoming engaged in particular activities that children acquire and change their self-conceptions, goals, and understanding of behavior and action. Moral cognition is not general, decontextualized, and disembodied; moral thinking and moral development are practical accomplishments inherently linked with the particularities of routine, everyday experience. Engagement in everyday practical activity structures and gives meaning to thought, including thought about moral issues. Practices can be local to a particular institutional setting, or as broad as a cultural tradition. Institutions and the practices they embody provide the context for moral development. Families, workplaces, and schools all embody ways of acting that require study in their own right.

For instance, Mergendoller and I (Packer & Mergendoller, 1989) studied classroom practices set up in a novel elementary school curriculum. This study was an effort to examine the details of the social interactions among children and among children and adults, and their interpretations of these interactions, in a classroom setting. Teachers in several elementary schools in Utah used an instructional approach known as Workshop Way; we examined how the curriculum worked on a daily basis, by observing classes in Grades 1, 2, and 5 in two of the schools, and interviewing in some depth three teachers and perhaps one-third of their students. Interviews with the students took place on three occasions, in the fall, winter, and spring of one school year.

Social practices in this case were local ones. A workshop comprising up to 20 tasks, in fixed order, was the major academic work that students attempted each day, with the number and complexity of the tasks increasing with grade. All the tasks were taught at the start of the school year, and their labels and instructions were pinned on a "task board" on the wall. Each afternoon after the children had left, the teacher changed the content of each task for the next day, thus ensuring that it was not the teacher who "bosses" the children, but the task board. Emphasis was placed on the pleasure of working and getting work done rather than on correct answers. Students worked at their own pace, moving independently about the classroom and interacting freely with peers, but they had to maintain a reasonable noise level and not stop working altogether. We noted that teachers interacted with their students to draw them into a set of practical social activities in the classroom. These activities reflected valued forms of social interaction and engagement, including helping others and seeking help from them, being tolerant of others’ faults and errors, taking academic and social risks, and working industriously. Each of these activities simultaneously encompassed an immediate practical aim and a developmental telos. First, each involved an end or purpose that was socially and personally meritorious or virtuous, for instance, providing another child with assistance in a workshop task. Second, each activity was designed to help the other children develop a "skill" that entailed conduct or concern that one would consider virtuous, for instance, sincere interest in others’ learning and academic progress in class.

We also noted that the teachers worked so that they were not the “reason” the children were doing these things; instead, the teachers used a common interpretive framework that ascribed responsibility for the practices to the students in a way that emphasized their effectiveness, their initiative, and their worth as individuals. But children differed in the extent to which they took up this perspective on their own agency, and in the extent to which they accepted the classroom activities as legitimate and meaningful. Thus, they also differed in the manner in which they engaged in the activities, and in the kinds of account they gave of them.

In short, the teachers’ organization of the social and instructional structure of their classes, and the detailed character of their interaction with students, accomplished three goals. First, the students became engaged in the academic and social activities of the classroom. Second, many of the children began to adopt a new way of understanding and talking about their ability, their own successes and failures, and their own academic and personal worth. Third, at least some students began to discover an intrinsic value in these classroom activities, coming to understand them as legitimate and holding themselves responsible for carrying out the activities.

In this study, we interviewed children not about hypothetical moral dilemmas, but about their daily participation in classroom activities, and about what they understood to be the meanings and purposes of these activities. We then drew conclusions about the manner in which they engaged in the activities, in particular whether they considered them legitimate.

What other kinds of study of morality in practice would be of interest? The practices in the Workshop Way classes were designed to be coherent and consistent, but this is not always the case. MacIntyre has proposed that modes of thought and practice in contemporary society have become fragmented and ineffective. This claim is worthy of empirical study. MacIntyre’s (1984) argument is that the Enlightenment project not only has led to a philosophical dead end, but is also responsible for social, political, and psychological difficulties that face us now. We live in a culture shaped by social and political changes initiated by the Enlightenment and, according to both MacIntyre and Heidegger, these radical changes have led us to anomie and alienation. Our society embodies at the practical level the same
oppositions that have hopelessly tangled ethical philosophy. Psychologists have tended to assume a moral homogeneity; if in actuality the moral injunctions of Western society are splintered and contradictory, we need to become sensitive to this in our empirical investigation. We can hardly expect moral development to be continuous and sequential if the practices that ground it are fragmented and contradictory.

Consider, for example, the debates over abortion. Although adherents to the pro-choice and pro-life positions are satisfied that they have made the correct moral judgment, there seems to be no basis for a reasoned debate between the two positions. Each side makes assumptions the other does not share, and conversation degenerates rapidly into name-calling and mudslinging. We all have witnessed the paradoxical outcome: Proponents of a moral position that advocates universal rights to life throw firebombs at the offices of those who disagree. The failure of rational persuasion leaves violence the only apparent option. A study of dialogues between these positions would be valuable, and would advance both theory and practice.

MacIntyre (1988) suggests that the Enlightenment's liberal individualism, intended to supplant tradition, has ironically become a tradition itself, a tradition of interminable debates over principles of rationality. Our lives have become split into compartmentalized spheres, each with its own kinds of goods and its own kind of evaluation (see Berger, Berger, & Kellner, 1973). We are expected to be mobile selves, able to slip quickly from one sphere to the next—from private to public life, from being a consumer of goods to producing them—all the while keeping our attitudes compartmentalized. These attitudes have been reduced to the status of subjective opinion, matters of personal preference about which we may be polled and interviewed, but which we are not expected to be able to defend rationally, simply because no one can say what a reasoned justification of preferences might be.

It is difficult not to agree with MacIntyre's (1988) claim that emotivism has become characteristic of our society. The night before the presidential election in 1988, the "MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour" interviewed people around the country, asking them whether they preferred Bush or Dukakis and how each man appealed to them. Political issues were scarcely mentioned; the interviewer took for granted that the only basis for choice between the candidates was personal preference. Voting has become the mere summing of preferences of individuals around the country; substantive debate among candidates has been reduced to strategies such as "sound-bites" selected to have the greatest impact on public opinion. In televised commentary following the debates between the two presidential candidates, the men were evaluated almost entirely in terms of style and image, with no attention paid to the quality of argument about issues confronting the country. We were told, approvingly, that Bush used the word "values" six times in his opening remarks, but that he did not appear as relaxed as in his address to the Republican convention. We seek, presumably, a candidate whose demeanor and vocabulary, whose rhetoric, can beguile us, rather than one whose policies convince us. As citizens, we are expected to choose between rival political ideologies on grounds that seem aesthetic rather than rational. Politicians appeal not to our capacity for reason, but to our presumed tendency to maximize our pleasures through the pursuit of immediate gratifications. As MacIntyre (1988) said:

The defense of rival moral and political standpoints is interpreted within the liberal order as the expression of preferences by those individuals who engage in such defenses . . . . The culture of individualism transforms expressions of opinion into what its political and moral theory had already said they were. (p. 343)

Research employing an interpretive approach to these and other phenomena of modern political practices would be of interest to a psychology of morality.

Heidegger has also considered modern society distorted in its practices. His analysis has centered on what he called the "truth of Being." This is "the way a historical people settles into an understanding of the world, of the gods, and of themselves." It is "the constellation of arts, science, and political arrangements within which they live out their lives" (Caputo, 1987, p. 236), and "the historical mode of Being-in-the-world to which each of us is assigned by the movement of Being itself, and the demands which each historical existence puts upon us" (p. 246). This level is more fundamental than that of ethical analysis; it is the level that moral philosophy presupposes and rests upon. Our current way of living is dominated by the persistent, acquisitive effort to manipulate and control. We have come to think nothing of, as Francis Bacon put it, torturing mother earth, twisting the lion's tail. Human existence provides the raw material for bioengineering, social control, and behavioral manipulation. In Heidegger's (1962) terms, we have by and large fallen into an inauthentic mode of being, where we view ourselves in terms more applicable to the objects with which we deal (computers are central today). The view that we are ourselves objects with fixed "natural" properties is one manifestation of this.

Ethical relativism, the yuppie pursuit of personal gain, and interminable emotivist moral debates, however, are not inevitable consequences of the failure to locate an objective ethical foundation. They seem inescapable only to those who still unwittingly share the assumptions that launched the Enlightenment projects. Once we escape the supposition that justification of an ethical position must take the form of an objective foundation, then other possibilities are revealed. Reconsidering the perspective from
which we understand morality and the terms in which we conceive it exposes a way of moving beyond objectivism and relativism (Bernstein, 1983). Reason, viewed in Enlightenment terms, has not provided the ethical and scientific justification that was desired, but it does not follow—counter Nietzsche and Feyerabend—that these two areas are irrational, that anything goes. It makes better sense to conclude that our modern interpretation of reason, shaped over the past 300 years, is faulty. In the same way, morality has not dissolved because the Enlightenment effort to identify objective ethical principles has failed; it remains possible that moral prescriptions can have quite a different kind of justification. We can appeal to the rationality that every tradition contains within itself. With this in view, we can fruitfully study the circumstances in which people resist relativism, and those in which they fall prey to it.

My point in this section is that, at the level of practices, morality in our culture is currently problematic. The lack of consensus over fundamental issues of individual rights and political obligation (to name but two areas of frequent debate) is understandable in light of the history of efforts at moral justification, but it is disturbing nonetheless. Because psychologists have viewed the development of morality as a logical rather than a social phenomenon, they have constructed an idealized progression through universal stages. It is time to examine the moral development of children in diverse settings, with different moral practices. We should expect to find that as morality develops, it is often confused and contradictory, and that our culture presents young adults with unique moral conflicts and problems, which they may or may not resolve. One would expect this to be particularly the case for groups, such as women and minorities, faced with particularly conflicting practices and roles. An interpretive psychology can usefully seek to determine the loci of these problems, and the ways in which people interact when moral incommensurability strikes and reasoned argument proves impossible. To what extent and in what kinds of setting do people recognize this incommensurability, and how do they respond?

Moral Reasoning

I suggested earlier that moral reasoning is not a matter of applying moral principles, analogous to the way we usually think of solving math or logical problems, but that it involves deliberation about concrete moral issues. If moral reasoning is not algorithmic, calculative cognition, then the way in which we study it needs to be altered. But first, how did this interpretation come to be taken seriously? How did such a limited and distorted interpretation of the character of human reasoning arise?

The Enlightenment suffered from a characteristic malaise: the tendency to give priority to a detached, contemplative examination of phenomena (the “present-at-hand” mode of engagement) and to diminish the importance of involved, concerned engagement in practical activities (the “ready-to-hand” mode). (See Dreyfus, 1991, and Packer, 1985, for discussion of models of engagement.) Those involved in the Enlightenment understood themselves to be liberating the individual from the power of external, often corrupt authority, through an appreciation of man’s intrinsic essential nature and an appeal to the uniquely human capacity for reason. But reason was viewed as something crucially different from Aristotle’s logos. By the time of the project’s collapse in the early decades of this century, reason had become narrowly construed as logical thinking, and was contrasted with blind emotion, subjective preference, and personal opinion. In other words, any form of reasoning that was not logical had to be faulty and subjective. Heidegger argued that the view that calculative reason is the essence of human being is a profound misinterpretation. Furthermore, this “thinking” by individual selves was a construction of the Enlightenment, not a preexisting natural process or law, which had finally been liberated:

The shattering of the sole dominance of the church in legislating knowledge and action is understood as a liberation of man to himself. But what man is as himself, wherein his being a self should consist is determined only in his liberation and by the definitely oriented history of this liberation. Human “thinking,” which here means the forming powers of man, becomes the fundamental law of things themselves. (Heidegger, 1985, p. 31)

Changes in the way reason was viewed were parallel in the scientific and moral projects. The new science seemed to involve an attitude of value neutrality that was best achieved through withdrawal from everyday concerns. Scientific observation appeared to involve only recording material objects’ real properties. Everyday perception became interpreted the same way, as passive gaping, as a mechanical impinging of sensory input whereby the “primary qualities” of bodies (position, form) caused “ideas” in the mind. Scientific reasoning was interpreted as logical deduction from axiomatic principles. A mathematical criterion was applied to thinking: an ultimate and absolutely certain foundation must be found, in the form of knowledge that would be unquestionable. From this foundation, valid reasoning could proceed through either inductive logic (comparing and contrasting simple, irreducible ideas, for Locke) or deductive logic (as in Descartes’s efforts to identify an indubitable starting place from which to reconstruct all valid knowledge). Soon everyday judgment was also considered this way. Thinking had become dominant over being: “this thinking understands itself as the court of judgment over Being” (Heidegger, 1985, p. 32).

The elevation of calculative, deductive reasoning to the central component of inquiry in both science and philosophy accompanied the denial,
already described, of any essential human telos. A telos expresses a shared sense of the proper ends of human action, one that stems from the communal practices and consensual values that make up a tradition. Once tradition became suspect, knowledge claims apparently independent of any tradition seemed the superior ones. And in the social and historical circumstances when tradition became questioned, there was an absence of consensus about the proper ends to human action. Rational justification of moral choices without reference to apparently contingent social and cultural particularities was considered a desirable alternative to the appeal to a tradition that was one among many, and that seemed repressive and sterile.

Cares and concerns were understood not as teloi intrinsic to human action, but as subjective, personal matters that could not ground an ethical philosophy, and that should be avoided in any scientific and philosophical investigation. Concerned practical engagement was judged secondary and inferior, and the teloi of practical projects were shrugged off in the search for genuine objective knowledge. The goals of practice were seen as subjective individual preferences, tied only to the desire for pleasure. Action was considered a realm where the passions are at play, where we are at their whim. Human growth—moral development—would come only insofar as we were able to cultivate detached reason, and this is best accomplished if we rid ourselves of passions, concerns, and involvements.

The priority of detached reason over concerned engagement can be seen clearly in Hume’s ethics, even in the way Hume placed emphasis on the way that reason is subordinate to the passions. Hume’s ethics, like his epistemology, was a product of the present-at-hand orientation. A dualist opposition of reason and emotion, and of mind and world, was taken for granted. Action was considered essentially mechanical, not intentional, and the passions mental states linked mechanically to action. With this picture, Hume was confident he could apply Newtonian forms of explanation to psychological phenomena. At root, human life was simply the search for pleasure and avoidance of pain; there was no goal to life beyond the pleasant accumulation of wealth. When individual human judgment was not the result of calculative reasoning, it was simply a matter of taste and opinion.

The same considerations led twentieth-century thinkers, including Kohlberg, to focus their analysis on the form of moral judgments, not their content. This decision reflected the way that reason had been by design reduced, especially by Whitehead and Russell (1910), to an analytic, content-free logic. We have come to take for granted their notion that logical rules are tautologies, that they provide a way of restating and combining propositions (or imperatives) without changing their truth values. Yet with this final move, reason was reduced to empty symbol shuffling. At the same time, empirical statements were considered objective reports of observed states of affairs, and human perception had become passive gaping.

If both reason and perception were interpretation free, they must be free of any evaluative component. It was against the background of an assumed sharp distinction between fact and value that Hare (1952/1964), for instance, could argue that a moral judgment can be divided into a portion that makes a statement about facts (the “phrasic” component, pointing something out) and a portion that expresses an imperative (the “neustic” component, recording assent or dissent). Hare rewrote the nonmoral imperative “Shut the door!” as “Your shutting the door in the immediate future, please.” The moral judgment “You should not kill” would be similarly rewritten as “Your not taking another’s life, please.” Once the fact–value distinction had been accepted, the analytic philosopher could happily examine the logical properties of each domain separately.

It might be objected that unless reason is a matter of deduction and calculation, it is nothing but caprice. How can ethical analysis be conducted without universal moral principles? How can a person reason about a moral dilemma without invoking logical analysis? In actuality, an approach to the study and judgment of ethical issues that makes no use of general principles had been at work for centuries before the Enlightenment changed the rules of the game. Casuistry is an approach to moral decision making that makes the case, a particular moral dilemma described concretely, the basis for an ethical analysis, rather than a moral theory of general moral principles.

Jonsen and Toulmin (1988) examined the history of casuistry and considered its contemporary relevance. They proposed that casuistry has much in its favor as an approach to ethical judgment. Moral reasoning, they proposed, involves:

accumulating many, parallel, complementary considerations, which have to do with the current circumstances of the human individuals and communities involved and lend strength to our conclusions, not like links in a chain but like strands to a rope or roots to a tree. Meanwhile on a more general level, a “cumulative” view of practical moral reasoning goes naturally with the rejection of “axiomatic” theories of moral philosophy in favor of a more complex and pragmatic view of ethical theory. (pp. 293–294)

This is an account in which the individual makes a moral judgment not by appeal to ethical principles, but by considering the particular character of the circumstances, and attending to what has been done in situations that appear similar:

The agent faced with the decision must make a specific choice about a particular action. The detailed circumstances of the action may be unique and unrepeatable; in considering its morality the decider will look for opinions about other actions in situations similar as possible to his own. These opinions may carry a certain “probability,” based on the reputation of their
author and the intrinsic argument, but the final decision how to act must rest
not on a probability but on the moral certitude of the informed conscience.
(p. 334)

Jonsen and Toulmin resemble other postmodernists in seeing moral in-
junctions embedded in a tradition and forms of social life that express and
embody forms of human care, concern, and interrelationship:

All reflective moral traditions keep in mind that the kernel of moral wisdom
consists, not in a hard-line commitment to principles which we accept with-
out qualification, but in understanding the human needs and relations that are
nurtured by a life of reflexive moral action. (pp. 342–343)

How might our research benefit from these insights? Carol Gilligan and
her colleagues have been conducting work that is cognizant of these com-
plexities. They have developed a way of reading an interview about a
real-life moral conflict in such a way as to identify “voice-relevant” aspects
of a person’s narrative. The case account given provides the material for
study of moral reasoning. Their open-ended clinical interviews yield complex
narratives that “reflect situational, personal, and cultural factors, in-
cluding issues of language, perspective, and the relationship between the
reader’s and the narrator’s language and perspective” (Brown, Tappan,
Gilligan, Miller, & Argyris, 1989). They approach an interviewee’s descrip-
tion of a moral conflict as a text to be read, not coded, as a text in which
different voices can be discerned, reflecting alternative moral orientations.
Orientations of care and justice arise from and call attention to the fact that
human relationships, both public and private, involve issues of both equal-
ity and attachment.

The narrative character of moral conflicts does not appear only when a
“story” is told to the researcher; the initial comprehension of the acts in-
volved in a moral conflict has a narrative organization (MacIntyre, 1984;
Mishler, 1986; Sarbin, 1986). When people reflect upon and describe a
conflict, they employ narrative strategies that convey the choice of moral
orientation and the orchestration of moral voices. Narrative organization
plays an intrinsic part in determining what count as the facts of the case
and the kinds of concern and obligation that are pertinent.

In research such as this, an actual occasion of conflict becomes the topic
of inquiry. It is not assumed that the facts of the case are self-evident, and
that the researcher’s task is to trace the application of moral principles to
these facts. Rather, the perspective from which the person understands,
interprets, and describes the conflict is the first order of business. The way
the moral problem is constructed, the terms in which it is presented, and the
moral concerns that are voiced or silenced all are taken to be manifestations
of reasoning, and worthy of detailed study.

Research along these lines could move in a number of directions. Moral
reasoning, understood this way, could be investigated with conflicts of dif-
fering kinds, in a range of social and cultural settings, with people of differ-
ent ages and varying social backgrounds. The voices of care and justice could
be further articulated, and other voices could be sought, for instance, the
voice of openness or acceptance that is suggested by de Rivera’s (1977) work.
Such work will find guidance in recent interpretive reconceptualizations of
the conduct and analysis of interviews (e.g., Honey, 1987; Kvale, 1983, 1986;
Mishler, 1986).

The Relationship Between Researcher and Research Participants

The third area where the hermeneutic perspective calls for changes in our
research into morality is that of the character of the relationship a re-
searcher forges with the people whose moral action and reasoning are
studied. We can longer take it for granted that science deals with facts, and
ethics with values, and that the two inhabit distinct realms. When the
Enlightenment began, morality and science were viewed as linked; system-
atic reasoning was to provide a foundational grounding for each of them,
and each had a claim to rationality. The rational basis of science was to give
it greater legitimacy than the ideological claims of theology. Scientific
reasoning was to replace theological accounts of the universe with rationally
grounded observation and experimentation, just as it was to replace theo-
dologial doctrines of sin and redemption with rational ethics. Scientific in-
quiry was seen to have intrinsic worth; the progress that science would
bring was considered almost inevitable. However, as the Enlightenment
projects played themselves out, it came to seem that a rational grounding
was possible only if science was value neutral, that is, if it dealt only with
statements of fact and withdrew from matters of value. Ethics (and philo-
sophy in general) became a distinct discipline; scientific inquiry, if it was to
avoid the naturalistic fallacy, had to be unbiased and impartial.

Such an interpretation of science ignores and suppresses the concerned
engagement that provides the background against which entities show up.
If we can no longer ignore the part played by perspective and involvement,
particularly in the human sciences, and if the optimistic coupling of science
and "progress" no longer seems appropriate, what more accurate perception
might we adopt? The two suggestions I pursue here are that we, as psychol-
ologists, should first adopt an involved, participatory kind of relationship
with the people we study, and second, engage in bringing about appropri-
ate change in those people’s activities. Only some degree of participation in
the practices of those studied can provide the background understanding
needed to ensure that the researcher’s interpretations are not arbitrary.
Furthermore, interpretation is motivated by breakdown in practice (Packer,
phenomena; we have lost our innocence. In this chapter, I have suggested that moral prescriptions are the products of forms of social life, which require study in their own right; that research into people’s concrete, practical ways of dealing with particular moral cases should take priority over research on formal rationalization; and that the researcher needs to adopt an involved stance, one that is directed toward answering the concerns that stem from participation in practical activities.

NOTES

1. This is Maclntyre’s (1966, p. 57) translation of the passage, which reads more clearly than D. Ross’s classic translation: “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim” (Aristotle, 1980, p. 1).

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