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Psycho-Social Determinants of Morality: A Comprehensive Review of the Factors of Moral Information Processing

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Abstract:
Human behaviour emanates from various psycho-philosophical as well as socio-political, biological and environmental factors. Moral behaviour gets initiated through a host of psycho-social features that influence the cognitive abilities, such as analytical power and decision making skills of the individuals. Any behaviour guided through morality is highly valued by the society as it leads to what is ideal and good, both to the individual and the society at large. The concept of morality and moral behaviour has been contemplated by various philosophers, psychologists and social scientists and there are numerous studies and theories on the nature of morality. Morality is determined by various psychosocial factors including the personality traits, social cognition, emotional intelligence, metaphysical beliefs, value orientation etc. It also involves different levels of information processing with covert Moral Reasoning, Moral Judgement and Moral Decision Making or Moral Intuitions, Moral Convictions and Moral Will which leads to Moral Behaviour or Moral Action. Moral Behaviour or Moral Action is the overt expression of Morality. The present paper explores the various psychosocial variables involved in moral information processing and the various notions that are considered bases of moral behaviour.

Key words: Morality, Moral Reasoning, Moral Behaviour, Personality Traits, Emotional Intelligence, Cognition, Values, Ethical Behaviour

1. Introduction

Morality in a general sense is understood as a set of values relating to right conduct, against which, behaviour is judged to be acceptable or unacceptable. Morality originates from the Latin word '*moralitas*', which refers to 'manner', 'character', 'proper behaviour' etc.; differentiating intentions, decisions, and actions that are "good or right" and "bad or wrong". Morality can be either descriptive or normative. Descriptive morality refers to the codes of conduct formulated by a society, culture, religion, community etc. and refers only to what is considered right or wrong according to the worldview of the defining agency. Descriptive morality is the foundation of descriptive Ethics. Normative morality refers to the code of conduct that is defined as right or wrong irrespective of the observer or any agency. Normative morality is rational in origin and identifies itself with what is actually right or wrong in a given situation. In a specific sense, normative morality attempts to be absolute in its definition. Normative morality is the foundation of normative ethics.

Morality has been viewed upon by various philosophers and social scientists through different terms of reference, thus formulating different views and approaches. The Relativistic position claims that there exist no absolute moral laws, and the perception of right and wrong are with reference to the customs of one's society [(Mahavira, 599–527 BC), (Protagoras, 481–420 BC), (Herodotus, 484–420 BC)]. According to Aristotle (384–322 BC), Virtues enable one to pursue the ideals they have adopted. Honesty, fidelity, self-control, integrity, fairness, courage, compassion, generosity, and prudence are the virtues and those who hold it will be naturally disposed to act in ways consistent with moral values. As per the Naturalistic view of morality, the universe is governed by rational principles and the humans have reason within them to understand, distinguish, interpret and obey the law. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC) argues that right reason is always in agreement with the nature, unchanging, everlasting and universally applicable. As per Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) the natural law which is defined by God, is authoritative in its form and is knowable by all human beings.

According to the Social Contract theory, morality is a set of rules that defines agreement between rational people for their mutual benefit and for the benefit of others [(Thomas Hobbes, 1588-1679), (John Bordley Rawls, 1921-2002)]. According to Deontology of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804); for an action to be morally good, in addition to its conformity to the moral law, it is also mandatory that the action must be done for the sake of the law. Utilitarianism holds the position that, an action is 'right' if it breed good consequences and 'wrong' if it results in bad consequences [(Jeremy Bentham, 1748-1832), (John Stuart Mill, 1806-1873)].

Shaping of Human morality occurs through the process of moral development of the individual which can be considered as a continuous process. Development of morality or ability to make moral judgements or decisions is one of the most vital psychological events in the process of social development and the life span of an individual. It is as a result of moral development that a child or individual becomes capable of differentiating between right and wrong and make a moral judgement or adopt a moral behaviour by using his own knowledge, and arrive at right decisions when faced with difficult choices. During the course of moral development, an individual acquires the strength and independence to act in accordance with that right or moral decision, however inconvenient it might turn out to be. The morality is shaped by multiple factors. During the process of the child's development, the experiences with family, peers and other adults influences his/her moral development substantially and in addition to that, the physical, cognitive, emotional and social skills that mature over time also influence moral development to a very significant extend.

2. Psychosocial Variables Involved in Moral Information Processing
Human behaviour emanates from various psycho-philosophical as well as socio-political, biological and environmental factors. Moral behaviour gets initiated by a host of psycho-social features that influence the cognitive abilities, such as analytical power and decision making skills of the individual. Various psycho-social variables interact and influence moral development during one's life span and moral information processing in the day-to-day life. Psycho-social factors such as values, metaphysical & religio-spiritual orientation, institutional affiliations, personality, emotional intelligence, social intelligence etc. are found to have some influence on the moral information processing in the human mind.

2.1. Morality and Values
The study of values and value systems have always created interest in the philosophers, political theorists, sociologists and quantitative psychologists from the time known [(Connor and Becker, 1975), (Allport and Vernon, 1931)]. Values and value systems are the vital factors involved in the understanding of human morality. Allport, Vernon and Lindzey (1960)[3], England (1975)[4] and Rockeach (1973)[5] have conducted extensive research based on knowledge that values play a determining role in the individual behaviour and the different value orientations significantly influence moral behaviour. According to Rockeach (1975)[6], values occupies a central position in apparently unifying diverse interests of all the sciences dealing with human behaviour. Kluckhohn (1951)[7] explain values as the criteria people use to select and justify actions and to evaluate people (including the self) and events. According to Lei and Cheng (1987)[8], the Chinese cultural values such as the maintenance of harmony, obedience and filial piety do affect Chinese moral judgments. The cultural factors along with values play a major role in moral judgment and the individual moral development depends on how and individual develops skill in adhering, understanding and managing the moral expectations of their culture and values (Shweder, 1990; Stigler, Schweder and Herdt, 1990)[9, 10]. Schwartz et al. (1992) conducted series of studies involving more than 25,000 people in 44 countries with a wide range of varied cultural types. The study suggested that there are fifty-six specific universal values and ten types of universal values. The universal values thus derived are power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security[11]. Each type of value has a specific positive or negative impact on the moral information processing. The convictions created in the individual by the personal and socio-cultural values thus have a determining influence on morality.

2.2. Morality and Religio-Spritual Institutions
The religious traditions and spiritualitistic worldviews across the world are found to have influenced the moral dimensions of the world societies. According to Simon Blackburn (2001)[12], "for individuals having theistic beliefs, ethics is not only tied up with religion, but is completely settled by it. Such people do not need to think too much about ethics, because there is an authoritative code of instructions, a handbook of how to live." It is seen that almost all religious traditions are centred on an ethical component or components, inspired by a supernatural guidance or revelation.
Judaism which is one of the oldest monotheistic religions of the world derives its moral principles from the Torah and Talmud[13]. The moral principles of Judaism are rooted on the belief that there is a single incorporeal God who provides the moral law for humanity in the form of commandments. The moral foundations of the Jewish society is based on the Ten Commandments and the latter literature that emphasises on rules about justice, equality, social welfare, love, kindness, and the ideals of peace and political freedom[14]. Christian moral teachings are teleologically focussed towards a greater vision of the 'Kingdom of God'; which is an ideal society where all live in peace, contentment and harmony upholding righteousness to the greatest possible extend. The Christian ethics emphasizes the need for mercy, grace, love and forgiveness[15]. The moral foundations of Christianity are based upon the concept of 'grace of God' which ultimately transforms the life of a person and enables one to always choose to act righteously[16]. Christian teaching is founded on the notion of inherent sinfulness and salvation through 'Faith' and 'Grace'. Sin according to Christianity is the estrangement from God that is resultant of turning away from God's will. God's will according to Christianity is in the Great Commandment, "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and Love your neighbour as yourself". Greatest of the Christian moral teaching is the command to love one's enemies[17].
Buddhism upholds the principle of nonviolence and the moral foundations of traditional Buddhism, is in the Pancasila (five principles) and the Noble Eightfold Path. Pancasila instructs the followers to abstain from immoral acts like killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct and intoxication. The Noble Eightfold Path guides moral behaviour and it emphasizes Right view, Right intention, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness and Right concentration. A lay person is required to vow to abstain from the negative thoughts and actions; and follow the Pancasila, while affirming his/her commitment to Buddhism[18]. Confucian ethics emphasizes the maintenance of modesty in relationships as the most important, and accordingly as per Confucianism, morality greatly depend on what one's relationships demands and how and individual works towards it. The

Confucian society emphasises on obeying one's elders, superiors, rulers, parents, and to treat everyone with respect. Accordingly as per the Confucian teachings, all individuals in the society must strive to cultivate wisdom, be trustworthy, and endeavour to do the right thing in all situations[19].

Hindu ethics are founded on the belief of Karma Phal Siddhantha [law of fruit of actions] and reincarnation. Hinduism teaches the need of reciprocity with the understanding that one may end up in someone else's shoe or a different being in the next birth and emphasizes on selfless action, the doctrine of 'karma yoga' for the benefit of others[20]. Accordingly, as per the Hindu beliefs all fortune and misfortune are the results of the deeds of the previous birth[21]. The Islamic ethics is founded on the understanding that God has given mankind the ability to recognize and understand God's will and to abide by it[22]. The Islamic teachings emphasizes that the primary relationship of human beings is with God and accordingly, the subject of ethics is to know and understand the nature of human relationship with God[23]. In line with this, Muslim theologians categorize all human acts into one of five ethical categories which lay the moral bases of Islam. They are the prohibited (*haram*); the supererogatory (*mandub*); the obligatory (*wajib*); the disfavoured (*makruh*); and the indifferent (*mubah*)[24].

Humans across the world believing in a higher being are seen to have a moral understanding, regardless of the environment to responsibly submit to God's will. Most of the religious and spiritualistic traditions in the world are seen to have a Golden Moral Rule as their focal reference for morality. There is a similar golden rule found in many of the world religions and spiritualistic traditions. Some of them are as below.

- **Buddhism:** Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. (Udana-Varga 5:18)
- **Bahai:** Ascribe not to any soul that which thou wouldst not have ascribed to thee, and say not that which thou doesn't. (Bahá'u'lláh)
- **Christianity:** "Do unto others, what you want others to do for you. (Matt 7:12).
- **Confucianism:** Surely it is the maxim of loving kindness: Do not unto others what you would not have them do to you. (Analects 15:23)
- **Hinduism:** This is the sum of duty: Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you. (Mahabharata 5:1517)
- **Islam:** No one is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself. (Sunnah)
- **Judaism:** What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. That is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary. (Talmud, Shabbat 31a)
- **Jainism:** Just as pain is not agreeable to you, it is so with others. Knowing this principle of equality treat other with respect and compassion. (Suman Suttam, verse 150)
- **Taoism:** Regard your neighbour's gain as your gain, and your neighbour's loss as your own loss. (Tai Shang Kan Yin P'ien)
- **Zoroastrianism:** That nature alone is good which refrains from doing unto another whatsoever is not god for itself. (Dadisten-I-dinik, 94, 5)

All religions and spiritualistic traditions embrace a specific dogma and set of moral rules. The moral rules in the religious traditions act as a reference for ethical code of conduct and play a significant role in the socialization and moral conditioning of the individuals. Thus the affiliating socio-political and religious institutions and the metaphysical orientation including the concept of personal God influence the moral intuitions.

2.3. *Morality and Personality*
Personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine the characteristic behaviour and thought of an individual (Allport, 1960)[25]. Personality traits are seen to have significant influence on the moral behaviour and moral competency. According to Athota and O'connor (2009)[26] the big five personality dimensions; Extraversion, Openness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, Agreeableness are significant predictors of moral reasoning. As per Stojiljković (1998)[27] Moral Judgment is connected with an individual's intellectual abilities, empathy and basic dimensions of personality. Curtis, Billingslea, & Wilson (1998)[28] inferred that there are significant associations between Moral Maturity and the two traits empathy and socialization. Studies conducted by Mudrack, (2006)[29] found that there is a significant relationship between personality and moral reasoning. Similarly according to a research conducted by Varghese & John (2014)[30] in the Indian population, significant relationship was found between big five personality traits and moral competency. Extroversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness were found to have a relationship directly proportional to moral competency.

2.4. *Morality and Social Cognition*
Cognition refers to a group of mental processes which includes memory, attention, learning, thinking, reason, judgement, ability to understand and interpret language, problem solving and decision making etc. In general sense, cognition involves information processing of the individual's psychological functions. Social cognition refers to cognition of social objects. The social objects are the people around, the social situations encountered daily and the interpersonal behaviours that transpire out of the day to day interpersonal interactions. Social cognition is one of the major factors that influence moral reasoning and it rely on the cognitive processes responsible for representing and integrating information about intentions, beliefs and the effect of action (Killen et al. 2011; Young, 2011)[31, 32]. According to Kohlberg (1984)[33] moral reasoning is a product of gradually developing cognitive processes and deliberations. It involves a complex integration between the affective and cognitive processes that gradually changes with age and it can be viewed in dynamic transaction across the course of ontogenesis (Decety, Michalska and Kinzler,

2011)[34]. The social cognition and specifically social intelligence is a vital psychological variable that influences the moral reasoning.

2.5. Morality and Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence is the ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in self and others. Emotional Intelligence is referred to as the process of reasoning that takes emotions into account. It refers to the ability to recognize the meaning of emotions and their relationships and resolve the problems on the basis of them. According to Pizarro and Salovey (2002)[35], handling or mishandling emotion can be judged by the moral validity of individuals' actions. There is a moral dimension to Emotional Intelligence, and it involves the *ability* to perceive and regulate emotions (Goleman, 1995)[36]. According to a study conducted by Ogunleye and Olawa (2013)[37] emotional intelligence is a predictor of moral competence. All of the Big Five personality traits have been found to correlate at least moderately with emotional intelligence and in turn with moral reasoning (McCrae, 2000)[38, 39]. As emotional intelligence plays a major role in understanding and regulating the emotions in self and others, it enables an individual to step into the shoes of others and thus enable a person to empathetically appraise the situation of others and thus play a vital role in moral information processing.

3. Conclusion

Morality is inherent in the psyche of every individual and is influenced by various internal psychological factors and external social factors. In view of the review of literature regarding various aspects of morality and the influence of the different psychosocial variables in the moral information processing, it is understood that the Morality is the result of a number of factors and an array of cognitive and meta-cognitive events in the human mind. Personality Factors, Emotional Intelligence, Values, Metaphysical Beliefs, Institutional Affiliation and the cognitive abilities are seen to influence the Morality in general and in specific, the Moral information processing in the human mind. The above identified psychosocial factors acts as catalysts of moral information processing and with reference to the review of literatures it is understood that, each factor has different degree of influence on individuals. The predominant system of moral information processing may vary between individuals, based on their psychosocial profile; cultural and environmental influences etc. Thus it can be concluded that the moral information processing is not similar in all individuals and there exist more than one system or channel of moral information processing. Individuals differ on their mode of moral information processing and each individual is inclined towards a specific system, based on the moral orientation they are exposed to, during the stages of moral development.

The psychosocial variables influencing the moral information processing needs to be studied separately and there is a scope of deeper research in this field. In view of the declining orientation towards Morality in the contemporary society (Varghese & John, 2014)[40], there is a need of further understanding the elements of morality and the agents of moral information processing. In-depth theoretical and experimental exploration in the area of morality and moral information processing will be beneficial in formulating intervention and techniques to impart structured moral education. Interest in this area of research will also bear high social significance in the context of the changing social system and withering moral traditions across the world societies.

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