TRIUNE ETHICS THEORY

Triune Ethics Theory: The neurobiological roots of our multiple moralities (2008) (PDF).   IN WORD

Triune Ethics Moral Identities are Shaped by Attachment, Personality Factors and Influence Moral Behavior (ppt)

Also see: *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality: Evolution, Culture and Wisdom* (Narvaez; W.W. Norton, 2014)

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Triune Ethics Theory (TET) is a psychological theory developed to meet three goals. First, it attempts to harvest critical findings from neurobiology, affective neuroscience, and cognitive science and to integrate them into moral psychology for the purpose of informing psychological research on the moral life of persons. In contrast to dominant theories that focus on top-down, deliberative reasoning (e.g., Kohlberg), TET is a bottom-up theory that focuses on motivational orientations which are sculpted by unconscious emotional systems that predispose one to react to and act on events in particular ways. Second, it seeks to explain differences in moral functioning through a person by context interaction. Individuals differ in early emotional experiences that influence personality formation and behavior in context, while at the same time situations can evoke particular reactions which vary with personality. Third, it suggests the initial conditions for optimal human moral development.

Here are descriptions of the three ethics and THEIR SUBTYPES (Summer 2010):

Security, Safety or Self-Protectionist Ethic

The extrapyramidal action nervous system (Panksepp, 1998) fosters basic survival and relates to territoriality, imitation, deception, struggles for power, maintenance of routine and following precedent (MacLean, 1990). When threat arises, the Security ethic tends to take charge, seeing what is advantageous for the self to adapt to and survive intact. The Security Ethic is the default system for the organism when all else fails. It was useful for our ancestors when temporarily facing predators or other dangers. However, it is not the best long-term orientation for moral functioning because of its self-centered nature. It is an ego-centered morality, rooted in instinctive survival. When people are fearful for their own safety or their self-beliefs, they are less responsive to helping others and more focused on self-preservation (e.g., Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005). When competition is the norm, the security ethic can become dominant among members of a group (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001). It can become an uphill battle to calm the self down in a world where one is confronted constantly with the unfamiliar (people, actions, things). Ongoing change can keep people in a state of alarm, especially when the right brain has been underdeveloped (Schore, 1994).

If the emotion systems underlying other ethics are damaged by trauma or suboptimal from poor care, the Security ethic will dominate the personality. It can dominate personality in two ways.

First, the security ethic can manifest itself as an overcontrolled disposition—a withdrawn, depressive **wallflower** *morality*—that tends towards freezing or submissive response as a moral habit. One can see this most easily in those who are chronically abused. For centuries, wallflower security morality was expected from wives, slaves and children. Second, the security ethic can reflect a resistant **bunker** *morality* , which is an undercontrolled aggressive disposition, as the means of self-protection (physical or psychological, i.e., ego). These two personality orientations can develop from neglectful care or trauma in early life (Henry & Wang, 1999; Siegel, 1999) and can combine in a unique person-by-context hybrid.

Engagement Ethic

The Engagement ethic is rooted primarily in a well-functioning visceral-emotional nervous system on the hypothalamic-limbic axis (Panksepp, 1998) and a well-developed right brain (Schore, 1994). These brain formations allow for here-and-now emotional signaling both internally (learning) and externally (sociality) (Konner, 2002). The engagement ethic concerns the emotions of intimacy and interpersonal harmony in the present moment, which means the right brain is dominating experience. Engagement as a "harmony morality" is about love/care/attachment, enhancement, and elevation. The engagement ethic embraces the notions of worship and community feeling. Engagement is "here and now," it is experiencing full presence in the flow of life, connecting to others in the moment.

The Engagement Ethic is dependent for its full development on supportive emotional experience during sensitive periods. For example, the functionality of the hypothalamic-limbic axis (HPA) is co-constructed by caregivers and shaped during sensitive periods early in life, as described by Bowlby's ethological theory of attachment (1988, 1969; Schore, 1994). Mammalian brains do not self-assemble. The process of attachment and relating to primary caregivers sculpts the particular ways an individual brain's emotion and cognitive systems function. Mammalian nervous systems depend on interactive coordination with other in-tune mammals for their stability. When caregiving is poor, the adaptive nature of emotion systems is disrupted, and when it is traumatic, cognition is undermined. Mammalian brains break down into physiological chaos when isolated (Hofer, 1987; Gawande, 2009). Inadequate care leads to deficiencies in the brain wiring, hormonal regulation and system integration that lead to sociality (e.g., Pollak & Perry, 2005; Weaver, Szyf, & Meaney, 2002). Insufficient development of self-regulatory systems can lead to *engagement distress*, a co-dependent reflexive orientation to social functioning. In contrast, ideal caregiving involves "*limbic resonance*—a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby two mammals become attuned to each other's inner states" (Lewis et al., 2000, p. 63). Limbic resonance "tunes up" empathy and puts the child in hormonal states that are linked to prosociality. The ability to maintain these states in moral situations becomes an *engagement calm* ethic.

Imagination Ethic

The Imagination ethic ideally is grounded in a well-functioning somatic-cognitive nervous system on the thalamic-neocortical axis (Panksepp, 1998), relying on the more recently evolved frontal lobes and especially the prefrontal cortex. Areas in the prefrontal cortex comprise executive functions such as planning, foreseeing consequences, stopping and starting actions,

and taking the perspective of others. These capacities allow for a broader view of action possibilities.

Triune Ethics Theory proposes that the Imagination Ethic has three forms. When imagination is detached from emotion and presence in the here-and-now, which means it is dominated by the left brain (McGilchrist, 2009), the imagination ethic can lead to a ***detached*** *imagination.* This is intellectualized morality that sees life in discrete pieces, solves abstracted moral problems without attending to the rich context, using rational logic to make social and moral decisions. Morality can become narrowly focused and degrades into a set of procedures. (See McGilchrist, 2009, for a detailed description of left-brain functions and the consequences of left-brain dominance.)

If neglect is sufficiently profound, the visceral-emotion nervous system is unable to "resonate" with others. The result is a "functionally reptilian organism armed with the cunning of the neocortical brain"—a psychopath (Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2000, p. 218). The left brain becomes dominant but additionally fueled by the primitive emotions of anger forming ***vicious imagination***, driven by a clever seeking of power. Ruthlessness is considered necessary for control. This is an ego-centered morality that is more sophisticated and reflective than Bunker Security (which is more reflexively aggressive). It is the sophisticated reptile. Ridicule of right-brain holistic views, destruction of anything that gets in the way of maintaining power, including for example, life forms that impede economic progress, can be viewed as moral imperatives.

Although humans have evolved to favor face-to-face relationships and have difficulty imagining those not present (such as future generations), ***communal*** *imagination* is the capacity for a sense of connection that extends beyond immediate relations. It uses the capabilities of the mind in a manner that is deeply prosocial such as imagining the consequences of one's actions on future generations, foreseeing possible social ramifications. Using the fullest capabilities of executive functions, it is able to make plans and monitor the execution of action. It is also dependent on embodied experience in the domain of concern. Only those with deep experience will be able to accurately and fully imagine future possibilities. Those without deep experience will operate from detached imagination.

In the ideal—when Communal Imagination accesses the whole brain and partners with the Engagement ethic, to being present in the moment, emotionally open but able to use higher abstract thinking as a partner—we have ***mindful morality***. Mindful morality coordinates the right and left parts of the brain, intuition and conscious reason. Mindful morality includes full presence (Engagement) in the moment—intersubjectivity and resonance with the other. It also includes the use of abstraction capabilities grounded in experience to solve moral problems based in deep ethical know how for the particular situation (Communal Imagination). Mindful morality allows the individual to deliberate about moral situations: imagine multiple options, action choices and outcomes; consider consequences and outcomes; weigh principles, situational uniqueness, goals and opportunities. This is moral wisdom. The moral imagination allows reflection on virtue and vice, which comes from knowledgeable experience. As part of the deliberative mind, mindful morality can countermand emotional reactions in the older parts of the brain, stopping what would otherwise be an instinctive response. It can also select the environments in which intuitions (and character) will be shaped (Hogarth, 2001).

Dispositional versus Situational Ethical Orientation

TET suggests that one's ethical stance can shift from moment to moment. A particular ethic can be evoked by the situation. Or better said, the experiencing of particular emotion (or not) influences the type of moral identity one adopts in the context. If one is personally distressed (fearful, anxious, depressed), one will more often make decisions based on the security ethic--what is morally right is perceived to be that which protects oneself and one's own. In contrast, if one feels positive relational emotions such as sympathy, one is more likely to act from the engagement ethic. Or, if one has shut down the right brain and becomes focused on the abstract, one may take action with a detached imagination ethic. Ideally, one maintains emotional calm, fully engages the right brain, uses the abstract skills of the left brain and takes action from a mindful morality stance.

Dispositional tendencies, shaped from experience since the earliest of life, interact with the power of the situation to influence individual behavior. That is, although particular environments may press individuals to activate one or another ethic, personality disposition also plays a role. Personality dispositions interact with situations to evoke different moral identities in different situations for different people. For example, a person might be habitually kind and compassionate in one situation, for example, operating from the engagement ethic at home, but ruthless in another, for example, operating with heartless imagination at work.

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