Morality in Groups: On the Social-Regulatory Functions of Right and Wrong

Naomi Ellemers¹* and Kees van den Bos²
¹ Leiden University
² Utrecht University

Abstract
Applying what we know about group-based identities and concerns allows us to improve our understanding of the ways in which morality is relevant to social judgments of right and wrong. We distinguish between three different social functions of moral standards and moral judgments. The identity defining function of morality indicates where people want to belong, and how they are regarded by others. The group dynamic function indicates consensual definitions of what is right and wrong that guide individual behavioral choices. The intergroup relations function of group morality speaks to the way people tend to communicate with and behave towards members of other groups that have different moral standards.

Morality Regulates Social Behavior
Moral standards communicate what is right and wrong in human conduct. They indicate what can be considered good, virtuous, or just behavior (Haidt, 2001, 2008; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Turiel, 2006). Furthermore, religious, legal, and cultural prescriptions of how to behave make use of the concept of morality, indicating the important role morality has to direct people's actions (Beauchamp, 2001). Morality is thought to be of central relevance to social interactions in communities of people living together (Rai & Fiske, 2011), not only as a prescriptive rule (dictating what people should do), but also serving a descriptive function (describing the behaviors people have engaged in and categorizing these behaviors as moral or immoral). Moral principles that are shared within the community function as behavioral imperatives (Haidt, 2001; Hartland-Swann, 1960). These “supremely important” shared goals or values (Giner-Sorolla, 2012) function as a standard of human virtue (Brandt & Reyna, 2011), which can be used to judge whether the individual is a proper and good group member (Gert, 1988), with social exclusion being the ultimate consequence of behavioral transgressions (Tooby & Cosmides, 2010).

There is considerable agreement between philosophers, biologists, anthropologists, legal scientists, and psychologists about the importance of morality and moral judgments in community life. Previous efforts to understand the social implications of moral judgments (e.g., Haidt & Kesebir, 2010), have distinguished between different moral foundations or principles that can guide such judgments (Haidt, 2001, 2008; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Turiel, 2006), and have specified the social concerns associated with each of these principles (Rai & Fiske, 2011). These approaches all touch upon the philosophical question of what people consider morally “good” (see also Giner-Sorolla, 2012), or how this may differ between groups and cultures (Sachdeva, Singh, & Medin, 2011). We complement this prior work with a functional perspective, addressing the psychological implications of moral goals and moral judgments for people's social identities and the way they relate to
others in groups (see also Killen, Margie, & Sinno, 2006; Leach, Bilali, & Pagliaro, forthcoming). This functional perspective allows us to examine why it is important for people to agree upon what is right or wrong, rather than aiming to specify which behavioral goals are seen as right or wrong. Furthermore, because moral considerations play an important role in group life and in society we argue that it would be important to go beyond approaches that address moral decision making as an intra-individual processes or that focus on individual-level concerns, needs, and motives.

A Group-Level Approach

Much of the work that has addressed the implications of moral behavior in social contexts, has tended to view individuals as independent agents that each have their own interests, standards, and goals. This is reflected in the way these approaches have considered the regulation of social relations and the way individuals live together in communities. Biological approaches (e.g., De Waal, 1996) have emphasized that individuals living together in groups depend on each other for long-term survival. Individuals may then help instead of harm others in the hope that these others will repay this favor when needed. Developmental approaches tend to focus on the caring behavior parents and siblings show towards those that depend on such care (Hoffman, 2000). Often these approaches argue for the rationality of such behavior from an evolutionary point of view, and focus on intrapersonal moral decision making. Work that is based on these approaches tends to see suppression of selfish or aggressive behavior as a key function of moral standards, and views mutual dependence of individuals who take turns helping each other as central mechanisms that foster moral behavior.

We think there is added value in complementing this work with a truly group-level analysis. This is why we propose an analysis in terms of social identity processes (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), which considers group-level conceptions of self, group-based behavioral guidelines, and intra-group respect as relevant processes and outcomes in their own right, regardless of whether individuals depend on each other or have something to gain by helping others (see also Ellemers & Haslam, 2011). Indeed, recent neuroscientific evidence shows that group identities can literally be experienced as an extended part of the self. For instance, people’s brain activity in response to the pain and suffering of fellow group members strongly resembles responses they show when they are exposed to physical pain themselves (see Ellemers, 2012). We argue that applying what we know about group-based identities and concerns allows us to improve our understanding of the ways in which morality is relevant to social judgments of right and wrong, and why this is relevant to social relations and group life. We further propose that this helps to clarify the social functions of defining behavior in terms of right and wrong in terms of individual and group-level conceptions of self.

The social identity approach specifies how people’s conceptions of self depend on the groups they belong to (Tajfel, 1978), how self-relevant groups provide guidelines for individual behaviors (Turner et al., 1987), and why people find it important to distinguish the group(s) they belong to in meaningful ways from other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). We build on these insights to distinguish between three different social functions of moral standards and moral judgments relating to interpersonal, intra-group and intergroup processes respectively (see Figure 1). First, we argue that agreement about what is right and wrong has an identity defining function in interpersonal interactions. Defining achievements and characteristics of individuals or groups in terms of their moral
implications helps people define who they are, where they want to belong, and how they are regarded by others. Second, we consider the group dynamic function of morality for the regulation of behavior within groups. Here we argue that subscribing to specific moral standards helps provide a consensual definition of what is right and wrong that guides individual behavioral choices. Third, we address the intergroup relations function of group morality, as we relate moral judgments to the way people tend to communicate with and behave towards members of other groups that have different moral standards. In the remainder of this contribution we will elaborate on each of these functions.

Identity Definition

When we form impressions of others around us, we are highly attentive to information speaking to the morality of these others. That is, we care more whether people are honest, trustworthy, or sincere than we care whether they are competent, intelligent, or skillful, despite the fact that both morality and competence are considered primary dimensions of social information and self-perception (Paulhus & John, 1998; Wojciszke, 1994). This is evident from our greater attendance and responsiveness to information relevant to morality (e.g., honest versus dishonest faces; Willis & Todorov, 2006; Winston, Strange, O’Doherty, & Dolan, 2002), and from our interest in establishing what is fair or moral in new situations that have created conditions of personal or informational uncertainty (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). In a similar vein, people seek information about morality rather than competence when encountering new individuals (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011) or groups (Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012).

Accordingly, people also are often highly concerned with the question whether their own behavior can be considered moral (Monin & Jordan, 2009) or at least as moral as the behavior of others (Gino, Norton, & Ariely, 2010). People are motivated to affirm and maintain their moral self-image (Jordan & Monin, 2008; Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006), and...
resent others who behave more morally than they do (Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008). Importantly, when people fail to live up to moral norms, this not only damages their own self-image, but also raises concerns about their social image. If they see no way of improving or repairing their moral failures, the fear of having their behavior condemned by others and the risk of social rejection raises shame, and causes people to hide their behavior or avoid others who might confront or expose them (Gausel & Leach, 2011).

We extend this work to propose that moral behavior is not only important for judgments about others or personal self-views, but also affects people’s group-based identities. This was illustrated in a series of studies by Leach, Ellemers, and Barreto (2007), offering consistent evidence that people want to belong to moral groups, rather than to groups that are evaluated positively in terms of their competence or sociability. That is, whether the group was seen as moral, truthful, and sincere was a unique predictor of the extent to which individuals identified with the group and was a primary source of group pride. Related to this, Ellemers, Kingma, Van de Burgt, and Barreto (2011) observed that employees derive pride from the perceived morality of their work organization. A follow-up study revealed that the extent to which representatives of the organization are perceived as behaving ethically predicts the likelihood that the organization is perceived as moral, which in turn predicts employee satisfaction and commitment. Similar conclusions were drawn from data collected among a large sample of middle managers in a world-wide operating financial service company. Here the perceived integrity of the organization (rather than its performance or efficiency) was the best predictor of employee satisfaction and compliance (Ellemers & Boezeman, 2012).

Thus, we propose that the identity implications of morality cause people to seek inclusion in and feel happy to belong to groups and organizations that they consider moral. The endorsement of shared moral values helps to establish and define group-based identities and explains whether we are attracted to specific groups, teams, or organizations. We build on this notion in the next section, where we argue that people are motivated to show that they are a good and respected member of their group and thus are willing to uphold and support the moral values that distinguish their group from other groups.

**Group Dynamics**

The importance of morality for who we are and where we want to belong impacts on behavioral regulation within groups (Aquino & Reed, 2002). To the extent that individuals want to be seen by themselves and others as belonging to a particular group, they will be motivated to show they are “good” group members. As the group’s distinct identity is defined by their shared moral values, an effective way of being acknowledged and respected as a group member is to behave in ways the group considers “right.” This function of moral judgments as a way to reinforce behavioral norms that are shared within particular groups or communities has been acknowledged by Aquino and Freeman (2009). They view moral decisions as decisions that take into account the social responsibility to the needs of others, and conform to group norms for behavior. For instance, even if people may initially feel happy when they experience personal advantage, they tend to become less satisfied once they have the cognitive capacity to realize that they have been unfairly advantaged over others (Van den Bos, Peters, Bobocel, & Ybema, 2006). Related to this, Shao, Aquino, and Freeman (2008) argue that displays of moral behavior can be triggered by community or organizational contexts that
enhance the cognitive accessibility of the individual’s moral identity. Consistent with this view, Chen, Pillutla, and Yao (2009), present empirical evidence to show that moral appeals that elicit trust in others are more effective than material sanctions in enhancing individual contributions to public goods in a social dilemma situation (Chen et al., 2009). A recent set of studies compared the impact of behavioral norms on individual behavior, depending on whether these norms referred to moral judgments (those who behave according to these norms are considered moral) or to competence judgments (those who behave according to these norms are considered smart). Results consistently revealed that moral group norms are more effective than competence norms in guiding the behavioral choices of individual group members (Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008).

Thus, there is converging evidence for the effectiveness of behavioral accountability and moral group norms in social contexts. Importantly, the studies cited so far have all focused on generic norms or universal morals, in that the behavior that was seen as moral always was behavior that indicated fairness, honesty, and concern for the outcomes of others. In addition to such generic indicators of morality, however, there are also culture-specific conceptions of what is considered morally “right” behavior (Heine, 2005; Sachdeva et al., 2011). Even within the same culture there may be group-specific morals (Monin & Jordan, 2009), for instance when different social groups or sub-cultures (such as political or religious factions) have their own behavioral code of conduct, which may be implicit (Noblesse Oblige) or quite explicit (e.g., religious dietary rules or dress prescriptions). Although these specific rules often originate from social conventions that developed to adapt to historical or geographic conditions, once elevated to the level of moral guidelines they can acquire the status of identity-defining indicators of “superior” versus “inferior” behavior (see also Brandt & Reyna, 2011). Taking into account the group-level implications of morality in this way, opens up the possibility that distinctive group norms can “moralize” behavioral guidelines that other groups treat as mere social conventions or even consider immoral (Giner-Sorolla, 2012). This complements analyses that focus on the distinction between moral guidelines and social conventions (Turiel, 1983, 2002) with the notion that conventions can evolve into morals.

Thus, at a more abstract level we argue that people tend to seek information about what is considered “right” or “wrong” by the groups they consider self-relevant. This is what helps them to establish how they should behave in order to be recognized and accepted as belonging to that group, and how this makes them different from those belonging to other groups. This further implies that the impact of moral guidelines relates to their appeal to shared moral values rather than reflecting some inherent property of the specific behaviors that are prescribed by these guidelines. It also explains the emergence of intragroup moral conflict, where different members of the same group may endorse different (and not necessarily compatible) concerns or norms as best representing the group’s moral values.

In theory group norms may reinforce any type of behavior in this way, as long as the consensual moral approval of that behavior is seen as distinctive for the group. Indeed, people’s awareness that they are accountable to others does not necessarily induce more cooperative or altruistic behavior. The presence of others may just as well inhibit the individual’s tendency to help others (Van den Bos, Müllner, & Van Bussel, 2009). As a result, individuals have been observed to display different responses due to the presence of others, depending on how their individual behavioral tendencies relate to (inferred) group or other social norms (Van den Bos et al., 2011).
Thus, the presence and scrutiny of others does not necessarily imply that people become less selfish. Instead, we propose that the impact of moral judgments on the behavior of individual group members depends on the nature and content of distinctive group norms. People will be guided by what the group considers the “right” behavior, regardless of whether this behavior is considered right or desirable from the perspective of society or the broader social community. To address some of the implications of this reasoning, Ellemers et al. (2008) examined whether the impact of moral group norms would be retained, even when the group prescribed individualistic (rather than cooperative) behavior. In their research, participants had to choose whether to work at self-improvement or to work to improve the outcomes of the group. The group either endorsed self-improvement as the moral course of action, or advocated that working for the group was morally right. Results showed that individual group members went along with either norm. That is, when the group thought working for the group was the “right” thing to do, they were more inclined to work for the group. But if the group considered self-improvement the more moral course of action, individuals were more inclined to work for themselves. Again, the impact of these group norms was more pronounced when adherence to group norms was evaluated in terms of moral judgments rather than competence judgments.

To follow up on this research, Pagliaro, Ellemers, and Barreto (2011) provided additional evidence that this is a group dynamic process. That is, they demonstrated that those who conformed to moral ingroup norms anticipated that this would earn them more respect from other group members. Indeed, it turned out that individuals did not adapt their behavioral choices to moral norms expressed by another group, as they thought this would not be an effective way to earn respect from their own group.

These findings help to refine the more generic assumption that the presence of others and community concerns enhance the salience of people’s moral identities, and hence can motivate people to behave ethically (Aquino & Freeman, 2009; Shao et al., 2008). That is, from a group dynamic point of view, when a group labels particular behaviors as morally “right” or “wrong” this is a very effective way to regulate the behavior of individual group members. For example, when a group makes known that certain behaviors are considered to be right this promotes the likelihood of occurrence of these behaviors among the group members. In contrast, denoting particular behaviors as wrong may have an impairing function on these behaviors and the group may also sanction these behaviors, with social exclusion as the ultimate consequence. As we have argued above, group sanctions may occur even when the behavior in question is not seen as unethical by society. Indeed, it seems that religious leaders are quite aware of this, as they try to enforce very specific (and often not obviously functional) behavioral practices by presenting them as moral imperatives associated with their religion and religious culture.

**Intergroup Relations**

Because morality helps us define who we are and how we think we should behave, it also has important implications for the way we relate to other groups. This affects whether we trust them, are willing to cooperate with them, or engage in aggression towards them. From social identity theory we know that people are generally motivated to emphasize and celebrate aspects of their group that help them establish a positive identity relative to other groups, and that they can use different types of strategies to achieve this. Comparisons regarding the societal achievements or material outcomes of the group tend to be constrained by existing realities (Ellemers, Van Dyck, Hinkle, &
When considering the group’s distinctive moral values, however, there is more room for interpretation that allows each group to maintain the conviction that their group’s morals are superior.

At first sight, this tendency to favor moral values that are endorsed by the ingroup over other people’s morals may seem relatively innocuous insofar as it helps people maintain a sense of virtue and esteem. Indeed, when different groups each have their own dimensions on which they excel this tends to be seen as a non-confictual strategy for each group to uphold its sense of value (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, when moral judgments are at stake, it is not self-evident that groups are willing to acknowledge each other’s superiority in this way. Indeed, whereas at least some people tend to consider diversity as something positive when this implies that people have different qualities or competences, humans prefer others to be similar to them in terms of their moral values (Haidt, Rosenberg, & Hom, 2003). As a result, when others differ from us in terms of our central moral values, this is likely to elicit quite intense negative emotional responses (Skitka & Mullen, 2003, 2006). Because humans so strongly believe that our own morals prescribe the only “right” way of behaving, we tend to display a lack of tolerance towards those who hold different moral convictions (Kouzakova, Ellemers, Harinck, & Scheepers, 2012) and socially distance ourselves from them (Skitka & Morgan, 2009). As a result, people who do not share the same moral values may even be seen as less human, so that aggression against them seems justified (Opotow, 1993; Skitka & Mullen, 2002).

Even if other groups in society explicitly state their intentions to behave in ways we see as “right,” this is not taken at face value. This can be a consequence of the strategy of “social competition” that people tend to use to achieve a positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). That is, when members of different groups agree on what they consider important moral values, they may still think of their own group as being “best” at acting in line with moral goals, causing them to devalue the behavior of other groups. For instance, research by Terwel, Harinck, Ellemers, and Daamen (2009) showed that when a commercial oil company indicates its concern with the natural environment, this is seen as insincere. This is consistent with the notion that people are reluctant to acknowledge other groups as being morally superior. Indeed, when oil companies support measures that help protect the environment their motives and decisions tend to be seen as untrustworthy and are resisted by the general public. Once again, our observation that moral disapproval for members of another group can either be the cause or the consequence of conflictual intergroup relations, is in line with our analysis that there is added value in understanding the social regulatory functions of moral judgments, regardless of the question which moral values people endorse, or whether or not they agree about what is right or wrong.

Thus, due to the strong motivation to see ourselves as moral we tend to believe that our group’s moral behavior is superior to that of other groups. The paradoxical effect is that we may fail to display behavior that is universally seen as moral (i.e., be fair and helpful to others) as a result. Indeed, research on so-called “moral licensing” has revealed that once people have performed a moral act and feel self-affirmed in that sense (Monin & Miller, 2001), they are more inclined to behave unethically on subsequent occasions. For instance, Mazar and Zhong (2010) recently observed that people were less inclined to behave altruistically after they had purchased “green products.”

This is not to say that people are unable or unwilling to take into account the perspective or needs of another group. When the moral ideal of equal opportunities (in this case on the labor market) for members of different ethnic groups is made explicit, majority
group members can be activated to improve equality. They then indicate personal commitment to achieving the goal of equality and are inclined to support affirmative action and cultural diversity (Does, Derks, & Ellemers, 2011). The way in which social equality is connected to moral goals does matter, though. Whereas moral ideals can challenge people to achieve these goals, setting equality as a moral obligation tends to raise threat and resistance (Does et al., 2011, Does et al., 2012).

In sum, due to the tendency to consider the morals of one’s own group as inherently superior to those of other groups, people tend to consider their group’s morals as normative while endorsement of different morals is seen as indicating a “lack of morals.” This may be a cause for strenuous relations or even raise conflict between different political, generational, religious or cultural groups in society. Importantly, this may be the case even if each of these groups has clear moral codes and individuals belonging to these groups are convinced they behave morally as long as they behave in ways their group sees as “right.”

A New Perspective on Morality

The willingness to consider other people’s outcomes tends to be seen as one of the universal foundations of morality that people from different cultures agree upon. Nevertheless, we argue that this does not define morality, nor does it constitute the essence of moral behavior. Instead, local (cultural, group-specific) definitions of morality may differ. Different sub-cultures, historic shifts, or specific moral connotations in different national contexts may cause some groups to see identical behaviors as inherently moral and “right” while others groups see this as fundamentally immoral or “wrong.” A case in point: the different moral implications associated with issues such as abortion, birth control, and euthanasia in national systems where these issues are highly secularized and tend to be seen as a matter of individual responsibility (such as the Netherlands) or are strongly connected to religious views on the sacredness of human life (for instance in the USA).

Specifying the social-regulatory functions of right and wrong is intended to extend our understanding of morality and to raise novel questions. The identity defining function of morality implies that judgments of “right” and “wrong” go beyond conceptualizations of morality as a means to curb selfishness (Haidt, 2008) as people use these judgments to define who they are and where they belong. Considering the group dynamic functions of morality makes us realize that our concern with others and their needs is not only driven by the realization that we may depend on their good will in the future, as the desire to be a “good” group member provides additional reasons to adapt to other people’s expectations. Acknowledging the intergroup relations function of morality helps realize that searching for moral guidelines that are universally shared may not be sufficient to prevent intergroup hostility, and that communicating about what is considered morally right may intensify rather than resolve conflicts between social groups.

Central to each of these social-regulatory functions of morality is the notion that these do not depend on the specific content of the behavior prescribed (e.g., suppression of selfishness). Instead, morality in groups refers to shared definitions of acceptable versus unacceptable behavior. Key questions to be examined thus pertain to the process and social functions of defining which behaviors are considered appropriate or characteristic for a particular community, and how these come to be seen as a standard for social judgments and decisions made by members of that community. This allows us to complement individual level conceptualizations of moral behavior as the result of successful
development or adequate reasoning (e.g., Kohlberg, 1984), with group-level concerns referring to feelings of belongingness, acceptance, and trust, which may be equally as important, in particular in situations in which people feel insecure about their standing in relation to others (see also Van den Bos, 2003).

This approach thus implies that there is no one-to-one relation between judgments of right and wrong and specific behavioral strategies. Sometimes concern for others or group norms induces behavior we tend to see as “wrong” (such as selfish behavior; Ellemers et al., 2008; Pagliaro et al., 2011), and sometimes a focus on individual goals and concerns is needed for people to do the “right” thing (i.e., behave in line with their pro-social orientation, Van den Bos et al., 2011). In each of these cases consensual judgments of right and wrong enable people to express their distinct identity, coordinate their behavior in groups, and determine how they interact with members of other groups.

Conclusion

In this contribution we have argued that an essential feature of judgments of right and wrong is that they inform social judgments of self and others and touch upon the interface between the individual and the group (Van den Bos & Lind, 2009). We have reviewed evidence from recent research demonstrating how these judgments influence the way social interactions develop in small groups and broader social systems. Others before us have argued for the importance of morality as a way to regulate behavior in social communities (Fry, 2006; Haidt, 2008; Tooby & Cosmides, 2010). Yet we know very little about the psychological processes through which moral considerations are used to regulate social behavior (Killen et al., 2006). Taking a group-based perspective to consider morality in terms of the social regulatory functions of right and wrong provides a fruitful approach that raises novel questions. For instance, when do people define their common identity in terms of shared morals, and what happens when they find out others question their morals? Are moral appeals used strategically to distinguish one’s group from other groups, or to regulate the behavior of individual group members? Can agreement about what is moral be recruited to improve relations between groups? Addressing these and related questions will help develop theoretical insights about the social psychological functions of moral values in group life.

Short Biographies

Naomi Ellemers received her PhD in 1991 (cum laude) from Groningen University. She received several awards and grants for her research on social identity, group processes and intergroup relations, including the Jaspars award and the Tajfel award from the European Association of Social Psychology, and the Spinoza award from the Dutch national science foundation (NWO). She held several editorial and administrative positions. Since 1999 she has been full professor of the social psychology of organizations at Leiden University.

Kees van den Bos received his PhD in 1996 (cum laude) from Leiden University. He received several grants and awards for his research on social justice. These include a fellowship of the Netherlands Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), a VICI-award from the Dutch national science foundation (NWO), and a dissertation award from the Dutch Association of Social Psychological Researchers (ASPO). He has held several editorial and administrative positions. Since 2001 he has been full professor of social psychology, including social psychology of the organization, at Utrecht University.
Endnote

* Correspondence address: Social and Organizational Psychology, Leiden University, P.O. Box 9555, 2300 RB Leiden, The Netherlands. Email: ellemers@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

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