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INTRODUCTION

What is right and what is wrong relates to who you are and where you belong—unpacking the psychology of morality

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The topic of morality – generally referring to the distinction between “right” versus “wrong” ways to behave (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010) – is undoubtedly one of the hottest and most investigated in contemporary social psychology. A recent review highlights the exponential increase in the interest of researchers in the psychology of morality since 2005, the rate of which is disproportionately larger than the overall increase in publications in social psychology (Ellemers, Van der Toorn, Paunov, & Van Leeuwen, 2019). This handbook aims to capture and give credit to the considerable advances that have been made in current insights on the topic of morality in social psychology. We organize this body of knowledge through an interpretative key that distinguishes between relevant sub-themes in this area of inquiry and systematically compares insights targeting intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup levels of analysis.

Before elaborating on these aspects, as editors of this handbook we will share how we approached the theme of morality in our own research, how our personal stories led us on this path, and why we are passionate to pursue moral questions through our scientific work.

Naomi Ellemers: My ambition has always been to understand why individuals are treated differently because of their group memberships, and why inequalities between social groups persist. This led me on the path of examining group processes and intergroup relations, which I began to study from a Social Identity perspective. I have been using this framework from my PhD project onwards, to advance basic insights in the psychology of the group self as a way to benefit the analysis of real-life problems. Initially, my attention was focused on structural determinants (e.g., permeability of group boundaries, legitimacy, and stability of the social structure) that define status relations between groups in society, and guide the thoughts and behaviors of individuals (Ellemers, 1993). For many years I worked with the assumption that individuals and groups could derive social status from any characteristic that would allow them to distinguish themselves from others in that situation. A collaborative project with Colin W. Leach and Manuela Barreto systematically assessing and comparing different sources of group pride and identification opened my eyes to the fact that morality was not just another indicator of social standing, nor should it be seen as a ‘second rate’ source of group value. Our joint publication (Leach et al., 2007) opened up a whole new perspective on issues I had been examining for many years, revealing the power and

pervasiveness of moral concerns and moral motives in group processes and intergroup relations. This view on the social meaning and group-level implications of moral reasoning and moral decisions was widely acknowledged in existing theories on morality. However, when I delved into the empirical literature I discovered the interests of researchers were very skewed favoring the intrapersonal level of analysis, mainly charting people's ideas about right vs wrong with hypothetical dilemmas in the moral reasoning (Ellemers et al., 2019). This reinforced my motivation to further examine the role of morality as a fundamental concern that serves different regulatory functions in group life, in organizations, and in intergroup relations in society (Ellemers, 2017; Ellemers & De Gilder, 2022; Ellemers & Van den Bos, 2012).

Around the time that I was starting to see the importance of morality for the collective self, Stefano Pagliaro visited the University of Leiden, NL, to work with me as a PhD student.

Stefano Pagliaro: I have always been passionate about studying low-status groups, in particular understanding the motivations that pushed the members of these groups to mobilize to improve the situation of their group as a whole (i.e., collective change), rather than their own situation (i.e., individual mobility). In Leiden, during a meeting with Naomi and Manuela Barreto, the idea was born to consider the evaluative dimension (in this case, morality vs. competence) among the factors that could influence the effect of group norms on the behavior of its members. This gave a strong impetus to my doctoral project and other projects in the following years. With different colleagues, I examined the differential effect of considerations related to morality or competence investigated in relation to intra-group and inter-group dynamics (Ellemers, Pagliaro, & Barreto, 2013; Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008; Pagliaro, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2011), in the evaluation of victims of gender-based violence (for a review, Pagliaro et al., 2020) and, more recently, in organizational contexts (Giannella, Pagliaro, & Barreto, 2022; Pagliaro et al., 2018; Teresi et al., 2019). In many of these projects, the scientific partnership started in Leiden has represented and still represents a point of common reflection and collaboration, as in the case of the present handbook. I realized through ongoing cooperations with different groups of colleagues and students who are not (yet) aware of this literature that the field could benefit from an overview of relevant strands of research, perspectives, and relevant scholars in this area. Indeed, I thought that although there is a large literature on many of the topics covered in this volume, it is not easy to find this type of overview, especially highlighting the relevance for the group, organizational and social problems I have been working on – that is, intragroup and intergroup processes, organizational climate, virtuous leadership. This is why I joined Naomi and Félice in this endeavor to put together such an overview that systematically addresses a broad catalogue of topics, approaches and authors.

After Naomi and Stefano had started their collaboration, Félice van Nunspeet became a research assistant at the Social and Organizational Psychology Unit at Leiden University.

Félice van Nunspeet: My interest in morality arose when thinking about a research question for a Master's course in Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience: I was intrigued by what happens in peoples' brains when (or hence why) they do bad things. Bad things in a legal sense that was, a perspective sparked by the occupations some of my family members held within the police department – among which my parents. Relatedly, as a thesis student, I proposed to examine the neural underpinnings of moral reasoning in juvenile delinquents. This led me to work with my supervisors Eveline Crone and Wouter van den Bos on a study of the neural correlates of social decision-making in severely antisocial adolescents (Van den Bos et al., 2014). After graduating, my work as a research assistant with Naomi Ellemers gave me the opportunity to continue to use social neuroscience – to explore people's moral motivations beyond their self-reported intentions and perceptions. This work soon turned into my PhD, which was focused on people's (implicit and

explicit) motivation to act in line with their own, as well as their group members', moral values (Van Nunspeet, 2014). The triangulation of combining neuroscientific methods with self-report and behavioral measures yielded both insightful as well as complex findings, which I continued to pursue and unravel in the years thereafter. The scientific partnership with Naomi is still active at Utrecht University, where we investigate the psychological processes associated with integrity (e.g., how people respond to and process moral criticism; Rösler, Van Nunspeet, & Ellemers, 2023), responsibility, and (im)moral behavior (see also Ellemers & van Nunspeet, 2020). My current research not only addresses these basic mechanisms but also examines how these reveal and explain the behavioral responses in applied settings. I have done this, for instance, with regard to organizational rule and norm compliance, and the implementation of public policies on social responsibility (van Nunspeet & Ellemers, 2021). Translating our psychophysiological and neuroscientific lab experiments into field studies is one of the exciting challenges I happily wrap my head around. Going beyond what people say and do when it comes to their moral attitudes and actions fascinates me, and I'm very pleased the neuroscientific perspective is covered in some of the chapters in this handbook.

Our personal stories summarized above bear witness to the common interest of the editors of this handbook in the theme of morality but also highlight the range of themes and methodological approaches to the study of this topic. This also reflects current research on morality, with different scholars and research groups addressing different facets of morality and its pervasive effects on reasoning, social judgment, emotions, and behavior, analyzing these issues from different perspectives and at different levels. The aim of this handbook therefore is to give shape and structure to this vast body of research.

One giant umbrella: different topics, different levels

The present handbook is structured around five main themes, each of which addresses four level of analysis. This mirrors the organization used to structure a comprehensive literature review using expert content analysis to classify empirical publications into five different themes: Moral Reasoning, Moral Judgment, Moral Emotions, Moral Behavior, and Moral Self-Views (Ellemers et al., 2019). We will now explain how we define and consider these topics that shape the five sections of this book.

Moral reasoning relates to the application of abstract moral principles as well as specific life experiences or religious and political identities, that people use to locate themselves in the world. Moral reasoning research addresses moral standards people can adhere to, for instance, in the decision guidelines they adopt or in the way they respond to moral dilemmas or evaluate specific behavioral choices. *Moral judgments* refer to the perceived dispositions and behaviours of other individuals, groups, or companies in terms of their morality. Research on moral judgements considers the characteristics and actions of other individuals and groups. People can use these as examples of behaviour to follow or avoid, or as a source of information to extract social norms and guidelines for their own behaviour. *Moral emotions* concern the emotional responses that are seen to characterize moral situations. They are commonly used to diagnose the moral implications in terms of emotional rewards and punishments of different events. Moral emotions research typically addresses feelings of guilt and shame (vs. pride) that people experience about their own behaviour, or outrage and disgust (vs. admiration) in response to the moral transgressions of others. *Moral behaviour* includes the behavioural displays that convey the moral tendencies of individuals or groups. These include implicit indicators of moral preferences, such as efforts to achieve more fairness or willingness to make cooperative choices, as well as more deliberate displays of

helping, cheating, or standing up for one's principles. *Moral self-views* concern the self-reflective aspirational and self-justifying tendencies associated with moral choices and moral lapses. Moral self-views research addresses the mechanisms people use to maintain self-consistency and think of themselves as moral persons, even when they realize that their behaviour is not in line with their moral principles.

Within each of these five thematic sections, the book structure further defines four levels of analysis. Different chapters highlight studies that examine intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, or intergroup mechanisms. Research on *intrapersonal* mechanisms addresses how a single individual considers, evaluates, or makes decisions about rules, objects, situations, and courses of action. Research on *interpersonal* mechanisms examines how individuals perceive, evaluate, and interact with other individuals. Research on *intragroup* mechanisms investigates how people perceive, evaluate, and respond to norms or behaviours displayed by other members of the same group, work or sports team, religious community, or organization. Research on *intergroup* mechanisms focuses on how people perceive, evaluate, and interact with members of different cultural, ethnic, or national groups.

To complete the structure of the book, each section opens with a vision chapter, written by scholars whose pathbreaking work has come to define and guide later work on one of the five themes we identified. In these vision chapters they share their personal intellectual journey and perspective on current and future developments on the theme they have been working on for much of their careers. We are privileged to be able to include two exceptional chapters as 'bookends.' In his opening chapter Jonathan Haidt reflects upon his perspective on the field of morality and how this developed in social psychology. He highlights the timeliness and relevance of the breadth of topics and perspectives covered in this handbook, proposing that the 21st century deserves to become *the century of moral psychology*. In closing, we include an interview with Susan Fiske in which she reflects on how her own thinking about the issues presented in the book developed over time. In this final chapter, Fiske shares her own intellectual journey and how it resulted in her current perspective on the topics described in the previous chapters.

With this structure and composition this handbook aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the variety of topics and issues represented in psychological research on morality, highlighting different levels of analysis, offering a broad variety of methodologies, and sharing how personal experiences and real life problem have inspired research questions and scholarly insights. In this way we hope to offer a collection of chapters that not only provides a review of the relevant literature but also to encourage people to be inspired by their personal stories to do science.

There are many people we wish to thank at the conclusion of this journey. First of all, *all the colleagues* who generously contributed to the writing of the various chapters, especially in a period characterized by the Corona pandemic in which taking on new commitments was certainly not easy. Nonetheless, all of them showed enthusiasm for the project from the very beginning, and did their utmost to bring it to fruition. Eleanor Taylor at Routledge encouraged us to believe this enterprise was possible from the start and assisted us in every possible way. Karin Dirks-Hansen helped us keep track of all the different authors, manuscripts, and materials that had to be put together. We thank Douwe Hoendervanger for harmonizing the designs of all the visuals in this volume.

A final consideration concerns the editorial process that led to the creation of this handbook. The three editors of this text have shared every aspect of this process, from the generation of the initial idea to the structure of the book, from the choice of contributors to the editorial work on

the chapters. This was a highly fruitful cooperation, which allowed them to constructively manage the critical issues that emerged. For this reason, the editors wish to declare that they share the first authorship for all aspects concerning the publication of this introductory text as well as the volume as a whole: their names are therefore presented in alphabetical order.

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