The Gappiness of the “Gappiness Problem”

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When Augusto Blasi pondered about how to best bridge moral cognition and moral action (Blasi, 1980, 1983), he had a sharply focussed problem in mind: How do moral judgments motivate action? Blasi was dissatisfied with a purely cognitive account that considered judgments of right or wrong as sufficient for a person's motivation to act. He added judgments of responsibility and a general tendency towards self-consistency as crucial elements to bridge the judgment-action gap. In the paper by Darnell, Gulliford, Kristjánsson and Paris, this gap is conceived from a much broader angle. Phronesis is not only required to align judgment and action, but also to recognize virtues, to adjudicate between conflicting virtues, to orient oneself towards the good life and to regulate one's emotions. This much broader perspective becomes evident when the notion of phronesis as outlined in the paper is contrasted and compared with Rest's four-component model of moral action. Rest's four-component model goes far beyond the question of how judgments motivate actions. Consequently, within Rest's model there is not just one judgment-action gap but there are many other potential gaps, such as the gap between moral sensitivity and motivation (e.g., when empathy leads to self-oriented distress), between sensitivity and judgment (e.g., when care is divorced from justice) or between self-control and all other moral components (e.g., when self-control is exerted for amoral but not for moral purposes).

While seeking a “single-component solution” for addressing the broad version of the “gappiness problem” may appear foolish, it is not completely unreasonable to do so for solving Blasi's much more circumscribed problem. At least, this would be most parsimonious. However, as the authors state such a single-component solution has not emerged. Meta-analyses demonstrate that the two constructs highlighted in the paper, moral identity and moral emotions, overall fare only slightly better as predictors of moral action than moral judgment itself (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016; Malti & Krettenauer, 2013; Villegas de Posada & Vargas-Trujillo, 2015). To be sure, there

likely is considerable noise in these empirical data, and many studies speak to the judgment-action gap only indirectly. Still, it is important to note as the authors do that empirical research does not single out one specific component as particularly powerful in predicting moral action. The “silver bullet” for bridging the judgment-action gap is not in sight yet and may never be.

Against this backdrop, the authors propose a silver bullet of their own for addressing the gappiness problem: a neo-Aristotelian conception of *phronesis*. As single-component solutions are deemed unsuitable for solving the problem, the authors present *phronesis* as a multicomponent construct. However, *phronesis* in all its different forms and functions is first and foremost described as an intellectual virtue and hence a cognitive ability. This raises important questions related to (a) the conceptualization and measurement of *phronesis* and (b) the relation of *phronesis* to primarily affective processes.

(a) It is out of the question that *phronesis* can be differentiated according to various functions it serves (e.g., constitutive, integrative, regulatory). However, this does not necessarily make it a cognitive ability with different components. In the end, there might be a g-factor for *phronesis* similar to the g-factor that has been documented for intelligence. As the authors emphasize the need to measure *phronesis* as a multicomponent construct, it is evident that such an attempt may lead to just one scale with little differentiation between any components. Such an outcome would require further reflections on the criteria that distinguish a single-component from a multicomponent construct.

(b) *Phronesis* as described in the paper is an intellectual virtue that requires pre-existing affective and motivational dispositions to operate on, or as the authors write “some espousal of moral values and habituation into ways of expressing these, such as a general tendency to be honest, kind, thoughtful, compassionate, and the like and to see these as one’s ends” (p. 24). These dispositions are supposed to be acquired in the course of development through role-model-guided habituation and later on are subject to deliberative processes encapsulated in the conception of *phronesis*. This way of conceptualizing moral development is akin to a dual-systems view of morality. According to such a view, there is a System 1 that is intuitive, fast, effortless and automatic, affect-laden and preprogrammed in its response to specific features of a given situation. System 2 by contrast is slow, deliberative and much more flexible. While the notion of *phronesis* as elaborated by Darnell and colleagues suggests that System 2 can easily take guidance over System 1, much of the research in cognitive psychology and related fields suggests that the two systems do not communicate and cooperate well (e.g., Greene, 2013; Kahneman, 2011). When in conflict, System 1 tends to override System 2. Thus, there is another gap in the way the authors approach the gappiness problem that needs to be taken care of. Clearly, this gap can be bridged by allowing for interpenetrations of Systems 1 and 2 and by identifying ways how emotions are infused with reasons as well as reasoning informs emotions. While the authors make similar suggestions, it remains unclear whether such interpenetrations of the two systems are in unison with the Aristotelian distinction between natural and intellectual virtues that is foundational for the paper.

Besides these critical notes, the paper by Darnell and colleagues offers many revealing insights, in particular for readers who are not completely familiar with Aristotle’s original writings. The paper deserves praise for picking up an important topic that has been dormant for many years in moral psychology and moral education,

namely the question of what constitutes moral agency. An answer to this question is crucial for defining moral character (Nucci, 2018; Sokol, Hammond & Berkowitz, 2010). Rest's four-component model was formulated in 1983 (Rest, 1983) and has never been seriously questioned or challenged since then. Kohlberg and Candee (1984) developed their own version of this model. While Kohlberg and Candee's model is clearly tied to Kohlberg's stages of moral judgments, Rest's four components are not. His model is attractive even in the era of post-Kohlbergian moral psychology.

Darnell and colleagues emphasize the parallels between Rest's model and a multicomponent conception of phronesis, which adds further credibility to their argument that the four aspects of phronesis entail major components of moral agency. However, it is also instructive to go against the flow of the argument as this reveals another gap, namely the gap between psychological theories inspired by deontological ethics versus virtue ethics. Both types of theories exhibit marked differences in the understanding of what the knowledge-action gap ultimately is about. Deontological theories are mostly concerned with the mobilization of moral knowledge so that knowledge becomes a force that motivates people to act morally. This view is best illustrated by Gertrud Nunner-Winkler's account, which describes the acquisition of moral knowledge and the development of moral motivation as two completely independent and separate processes (Nunner-Winkler, 2007). While moral knowledge is generally acquired early in children's lives according to this account, the development of moral motivation is a much slower process that is more contingent upon an individual's upbringing (Nunner-Winkler, 2009). Developmental accounts offered by virtue theorists take the opposite view. In these accounts, moral motivation is acquired through the process of habit formation while knowledge and proper understanding of virtues is a later developmental achievement. Accordingly, virtue theorists are far less concerned with knowledge mobilization than with the ability to apply moral knowledge the right way. From a deontological perspective, the knowledge-action gap is about energizing the person whereas from a virtues perspective it is about steering him or her towards the right end. Both perspectives are more complementary than contradictory. Ultimately, it will be essential to bring them together.

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