Letter to the Editor

On Shooting the Messenger

Although we remain enthusiastic supporters of the recent move on the part of Human Development, and its editor, Larry Nucci, to earmark additional journal space for promoting public exchanges between authors and their critics, newly seen from our present crash sight vantage at the bottom of what feels to be a multi-vehicle pileup, all reasonable hopes of ever being allocated sufficient space to seriously respond to all of our commentators appear similarly dashed. Consequently, our best hope in walking away from all of this is to crawl out from under as much of the collective weight of these criticisms as possible, both by selectively addressing the most pointed of the concerns raised by our critics, and by re-emphasizing what we judge to have been the original ‘take-home’ message of our work.

Although we remain hopeful that there are potentially others still waiting in the wings, we have so far especially profited from commentaries by three colleagues: Daniel Lapsley, Tobias Krettenauer, and Sam Hardy, each of whom, in their own way, has taken aim at what they imagine to be our Achilles’ heel.

In the ‘The Self as Legion’ letter offered by Daniel Lapsley [2009], for example, readers are reminded of the New Testament tale involving Jesus and a Gadarene demoniac – a parable all about a certain man (perhaps there were two) so overtaken by ‘unclean’ spirits as to require being seriously chained and fettered. Although in resurrecting this parable it remains somewhat unclear who, exactly, Lapsley has in mind for the Jesus part, it is not especially difficult to work out the identities of those slated for the role of the Gadarenes – evidently it is those (perhaps like ourselves) whose ‘inner demons’ need to be ‘cast off,’ and whose ‘clever…methodologies,’ ‘determined’ claims, and ‘rhetorically vivid’ conclusions threaten to entice others to go adrift in what Lapsley regards as the ‘postmodern, polyphonic sea’ (p. 2). Although reasonably content with the charge of having been especially ‘determined,’ ‘vivid’ and, perhaps even ‘clever’ (presumably like a fox), we remain a bit distressed at being somehow herded in with the postmodernists, all for having
simply reported what our research participants claimed to believe about themselves. We did, after all, discourteously refer to postmodernism as a 'French fad,' and came out in favor of the prospect of its being nominated as a candidate for the silliest argument. Other bit-part players in Lapsley’s allegorical attack remain underspecified. We leave it to the tender mercies of his readers, for example, to sort out whom, in particular, he might envision as making up the ‘swine herd’ (p. 1). Still, if we are like Gadarenes, and he Jesus, then you, as readers, seem the only remaining candidates. Finally, we take some end-game pleasure in the ultimate fate of ‘Legion,’ who, we learn in Luke 8:39, ‘went his way and published throughout the whole city…’

In addition to otherwise needing to be ‘chained and fettered,’ the main shortcoming of our actual research report, according to Lapsley [2009], is that we supposedly misread the ‘multiplicitous’ rendering of selfhood common to so many of our late adolescent respondents. We did this, apparently, by failing to recognize that what they actually meant to say about their own self-proclaimed synchronic disunity really constituted evidence that these ‘participants were struggling with how to articulate a social cognitive view of dispositional coherence’ (p. 3) (i.e., a view according to which self and context are not either/or options, but interpenetrate in complex ways). Presumably we missed all of this because, according to Lapsley, we were ‘row[ing] in the wake of [our] own meta-theoretical preferences’ (p. 3). Perhaps this is it. Perhaps if we had been more attentive to Lapsley and Narvaez’s [2004] book, and to the many decades so many have given over to theorizing away the fact that we all regularly say one thing and then do another, we might have better learned to row in the wake of Lapsley’s, rather than our own, meta-theoretical preferences. In truth, our own meta-theoretical preferences rather let us down. Based on our own earlier explorations of the development of self-continuity [Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003] we began this work fully imagining that, in thinking about matters of self-unity, young people would build increasingly complex hierarchical accounts of how their own seemingly contradictory bits and pieces might come to be integrated in just the complex interactive ways for which Lapsley is thumping. In fact, something very much like this was clearly in evidence among our younger adolescents. What took us and our meta-theoretical preferences by surprise was how blithely our older respondents set such integrative ambitions aside, and how, for them, constituting a ‘Legion’ seemed preferable to being held personally responsible for their ‘bad’ behaviors.

Tobias Krettenauer’s [2009] letter, entitled ‘There Is No Self without Responsibility, as There Is No Responsibility without the Self’, was read by us as something of a case study in inconsistent parenting. On the one hand, we were taken to task for having ‘completely left out’ references to ‘more than 25 years of theoretical and empirical research on the development of the moral self’ (p. 4), but were later reminded, on the other hand, that the bulk of this literature has chosen
volunteerism and moral exemplariness as main criteria for studying the self-relevance of morality’ (p. 5), and so is largely irrelevant to our own concerns with matters of responsibility. We were chastised for relying on ‘outdated’ references to Kohlbergian ideas ‘abandoned in the 1980s’ (p. 4), and urged instead to borrow more heavily from Blasi’s [1983] ‘self model.’ Although praised for holding up to scrutiny the ‘core principle’ that ‘individuals strive for unity and consistency’ (p. 4), we were subsequently warned that trying to do so constitutes a kind of performative contradiction, because (confusedly) ‘embracing multiplicity can be considered just another way to establish unity’ (p. 4). We were credited with having made a good choice in asking research participants about prior actions they were ‘proud of’ (because pride, like guilt, was said to ‘require internal attributions’), but somehow found wanting for also inquiring about actions they ‘were not proud of’ – presumably a choice of words so pregnant with externalist prospects that our findings were an arbitrary consequence of our choice of method.

Perhaps most tellingly, Krettenauer (like Lapsley) claimed that our focus on the thing that our research participants have done that they are least proud of somehow commits us to a form of ‘either/or,’ ‘split’ or ‘binary logic.’ What both Krettenauer and Lapsley seem to be angling for instead is a level analysis where:

‘Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same; …
And one to me are shame and fame.’

[Emerson, R.W., Brahma]

Such top-lofty levels of abstraction, though redolent with exotic vapors of the East, are not especially hard to come by. One cannot hope to break 100 on any familiar IQ test without appreciating that there is some joining principle that overlooks the differences between a coat and a dress, and egg and a seed, or a poem and a statue. Such things can, of course, be synchronistically overdone, and it is not obvious that Krettenauer’s claim that ‘responsibility is both illusionary and real’ (p. 6) is not a case in point, but never mind. The real point is not what we as authors, or our critics, might think. Rather, what is at issue here is what our various adolescent research participants thought. The evidence seems to suggest that they were quick to abandon what Krettenauer called the ‘core and guiding principle of research on the moral self, the idea that individuals strive for unity and consistency’ (p. 4), all in favor of a more multiplicitous understanding of themselves and others. If someone deserves to be shot for this it is presumably our research participants, and not ourselves.

Our third letter (offered by Sam Hardy [2009] under the title ‘Is Development Always Progressive?’) took up what is one of the more worrisome findings in the data we report – that the
oldest of our research participants tended not to rely upon the most structurally complex of the various problem solution strategies presumably available to them. That is, even the youngest of our research participants appeared to already have well in place hierarchal ways of parsing their actions in such a way that some of these accounts were subsumed under still more abstract explanatory accounts. That is, they were all capable of saying something like ‘yes, I am still fully awash in the milk of human kindness, because the seemingly petty action you have just caught me at is either a roundabout means to some still kinder end, or merely the rearing of some differently wired, unconscious, and hard-to-control unconscious impulse.’ The problem is that some (especially older respondents) simply did not do this, and instead externalized responsibility for their ‘bad,’ but not their ‘good’ behaviors. The interpretive dilemma that captured Hardy’s attention is working out why this might be so. As he put it, ‘the first thought that came to my mind was a question: is development always progressive? Are all changes that occur across adolescence and young adulthood necessarily improvements in psychological and social functioning?’ (p. 7). His provisional answer to his own question is ‘no,’ because ‘developmental change is a dynamic process involving progression and digression’ (p. 8). More particularly, and with direct reference to our own work, he asked ‘is the transition to a greater tendency to externally attribute bad behavior in late adolescence a welcome development?’ (p. 8).

‘Probably not,’ he suggests, and goes on to label this shift as an instance of what Bandura [2002] has called selective moral disengagement – a shift that he speculates may be the byproduct of ‘a particular cultural worldview’ (p. 8). The problem that all of this raises for Hardy is that our findings seem to fly in the face of other evidence ‘showing an increased sense of moral responsibility with age,’ and ‘an increased understanding across adolescence in the consequences of one’s acts on others’ (p. 9). Not unlike our own conclusion, he reasons that ‘perhaps it is this increased negative reaction (e.g., guilt) to bad behaviors that partially motivates moral disengagement from such behaviors. Perhaps, [he suggests,] individuals are making a choice to betray their own moral sense in order to avoid feeling bad’ (p. 9). Like Hardy, we remain puzzled by the task of locating our findings within an interpretive context that has consistently, perhaps too consistently, read age-graded changes as evidence of ‘progress.’

So where did it all go wrong? In a recent review of Theresa Sanders’ Approaching Eden: Adam and Eve in Popular Culture [Bethune, 2009], it’s noted that

Neither of the first couple is very brave about accepting responsibility; he blames her, and she blames the serpent, who, if anyone had bothered to ask, would surely have replied that ‘The devil made me do it.’
Among all of the unique things about Adam and Eve’s unusual predicament is the fact that they somehow managed to absolve themselves of any responsibility for eating the forbidden fruit without having first passed through all of those building levels of cognitive sophistication commonly experienced by ordinary adolescents. Evidently they were spared all of those interim stages of moral development that usually intertwine moral maturation. Still, it remains an open question whether, had they not been brought into existence fully formed, they would have been any less likely to slip the usual leash on responsibility.

We believe that they would not. We say this because despite decades of research that documents adolescents marching through those stages of identity formation that renders them (mostly) morally motivated young adults – the overwhelming general proclivity of these same adults is to externalize the impetus for their behaviors, especially if they are morally dubious and guilt provoking. Given that fundamental attribution errors [Ross, 1977], self-serving biases [Miller & Ross, 1975] and moral disengagements [Bandura, 2002] are some of the most ubiquitous and reliable findings in the psychological literature, it is odd that we do not have at least 25 years of developmental findings documenting the self-construals that may play into this ‘bad’ developmental outcome. As noted by Dr. Krettenauer, the literature documenting a relationship between moral selves and moral motivations has not been so neglected.

When, in the present study, we explored conceptions of moral identity that were not framed in terms of moral motivation, but rather as good and bad deeds already done, we found that ‘normally developed’ late adolescents generally described a self-concept that puts the weight of responsibility for their bad behaviors fully on the situation. To us, this suggested that the divergent literature relating moral identity to moral motivation was not going to help us much in understanding our findings, and, as noted by Dr. Krettenauer, we did not spend many words in our manuscript pretending that it did.

As noted by our commentators, these findings raise challenges and mark contradictions. Most obviously – how can the identity development trajectories for moral motivation and explanations for (im)moral behaviors be so divergent? Our own attempt at an explanation is that these equal, but oppositely vectored trajectories represent progressively more sophisticated and more effective means of solving two seemingly unrelated problems – problems that developmental theorists may wish to understand as related insofar as they seem to involve ‘morality,’ but that may be largely unrelated as they are represented and manifest in the minds and behaviours of rank-and-file human beings. Normally developing adolescents may imagine themselves as increasingly unified as a means of predicting and motivating desired future behaviors, but when these behaviours
occasionally fail to manifest, they have another similarly sophisticated self-construal at the ready – like Adam and Eve, they simply point the finger of blame elsewhere, presumably to prevent themselves from feeling too badly about these failures.

All of this familiar blame casting is commonly engaged in – everyday by everyday people – with little apparent thought given to its broader implications for matters of self-unity and personal responsibility. This is, perhaps, because developing adolescents (and developing adults) are not moral philosophers. (Neither, for that matter, are developmental psychologists, though they all-too-often approach their science as if they were.) As bottom-up, in-the-moment problem solvers, people apparently do not tend to dwell on the propositional inconsistencies over which philosophers of self and morality tend to ruminate. For example, our adolescent participants routinely claimed to be a unified self (because that’s what you’re supposed to be) while going on to describe themselves as context-dependent multiplicities (because doing so made them feel less guilty about trash-talking their friend). If subsequently asked who was then responsible for their behavior, they always replied that they themselves were (because they nevertheless understand that someone must be held to account). Yes, our participants could be called out by Rorty for often evoking the word self without going on to describe something that sounded very self-like. But they needn’t feel too bad – Heidegger often did the same thing.

So where does all of this leave Adam and Eve? Presumably sallying forth with their two young sons Cain and Abel somewhere east of Eden – a journey through developmental stages that would hopefully lead them to show a greater capacity for accepting moral responsibility than evidenced by their parents. Still, if one or the other should morally transgress, we suspect that they too may try to avoid responsibility for their actions by denying being their brother’s keeper.

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References


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