

A Paradox of Individual and Group Morality: Social Psychology as Empirical Philosophy

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Our colleague John Schopler used to tell us—gleefully, one might add—that whereas philosophy makes the trivial sublime, social psychology makes the sublime trivial. It was with equal measures of enthusiasm and trepidation, then, that we decided to approach a classic problem of philosophy—the question of whether humankind can attain perfection—from a social-psychological perspective. The aforementioned question can be traced through three millennia of intellectual history and, over the course of time, has taken on a variety of meanings (Passmore, 2000). We are concerned here with the question of whether humankind can achieve moral perfection or “can be entirely free of any moral defect” (Passmore, 2000, p. 27).

In the spirit of this volume, we aim to illustrate how social psychology can benefit from greater familiarity with philosophy and how, through empirical research, social psychology can inform classic philosophical problems. Our thesis is that the incompatibility of the moral code governing interindividual relations with a more selfish moral code governing intergroup relations blocks the path of moral progress. In the first part of this essay we draw on philosophical literature to offer a rationale for this thesis before examining it empirically in the second part.

We take as our point of departure the turn of the 19th century—a time of widespread belief in moral perfectibility. This optimism derived from a variety

of sources, most notably the belief expressed in Locke's (1693/1989) *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* and Rousseau's (1762/1966) *Émile* that moral perfection could be attained through education, J. S. Mill's (1861) view that government could serve as an agent of perfection, and Darwin's (1859) claim at the end of *The Origins of Species* that "as natural selection solely works by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection" (p. 489). The outbreak of World War I in 1914 marked a dramatic turning point for perfectibilism, however, and what little faith in moral perfectibility persisted thereafter was extinguished by the unspeakable crimes of the Nazi regime. Indeed, the combined effect of both world wars was so devastating to the prospect of moral perfectibility that, with appropriate nuance, Passmore (2000) drew a historical boundary between "the optimistic perfectibilism of the pre-1914 world" and the "skepticism and cynicism of the post-1939 world" (p. 414).

HISTORICAL CONCERN WITH INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP MORALITY

For theologians Barth (1960) and Niebuhr (1941), war brings to the surface the incompatibility of, on the one hand, a set of norms or moral code dictating the restriction of self-interest for the benefit of other individuals and, on the other hand, a moral code dictating loyal devotion to the pursuit of group interest at the expense of other groups. Barth considered World War I to be the defining event in his intellectual history—an event that contributed to his view that "man is not good but rather a downright monster" (Barth, 1960, p. 58). What concerned Barth most was how, as soon as the first shots were fired, the standard bearers of perfectibilism abandoned the ideals of universal brotherhood and donned the cloak of nationalistic patriotism. Niebuhr (1941) expressed a similar concern when he wrote, "The group is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centered and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual. An inevitable moral tension between individual and group morality is therefore created.... This tension is naturally most apparent in the conscience of the responsible statesmen, who are bound to feel the disparity between the canons of ordinary morality and the accepted habits of collective and political behavior" (Niebuhr, 1941, p. 222).

War, then, creates a paradox: If one follows the dictates of individual morality, one is out of step with group morality, but, at the same time, one cannot obey the tenets of group morality without violating those of individual morality. Previous references to this paradox can be found in Plato's (1891) *Republic* and Machiavelli's (1515/1952) *The Prince*.

Early social psychological treatises of group behavior demonstrated a keen awareness of this distinction between individual and group morality. For example, Le Bon (1896) wrote:

Taking the word "morality" to mean constant respect for certain social conventions, and the permanent repression of selfish impulses, it is quite evident that crowds are too

impulsive and too mobile to be moral. If, however, we include in the term morality the transitory display of certain qualities such as self-abnegation, self-sacrifice, disinterestedness, devotion, and the need of equity, we may say, on the contrary, that crowds may at times exhibit a very lofty morality. (Le Bon, 1896, p. 43)

McDougall (1920) expressed a related view: “The group spirit secures that the egoistic and the altruistic tendencies of each man’s nature, instead of being in perpetual conflict, as they must be in its absence, shall harmoniously co-operate and re-enforce one another throughout a large part of the total field of human activity” (McDougall, 1920, p. 79). The resemblance to Niebuhr’s (1941) view is compelling: The quest for individual morality entails a “perpetual conflict” between self-interest and altruism; however, group morality reinforces mutual concerns with self-interest and altruism.

Although influential in the very early days of social psychology, Le Bon’s (1896) and McDougall’s (1920) ideas fell by the wayside after the centerpiece of their analysis—the group mind concept—was criticized by F. Allport (1924). Nevertheless, in his later writing, Allport (1962) referred to the relationship between the individual and the collective as the “master problem of social psychology” (p. 7). Allport’s change of heart encouraged research on such diverse topics as social facilitation, social loafing, and individual versus group creativity. The distinction between individual and group morality, however, was all but forgotten.

AN EMPIRICAL DEMONSTRATION OF INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP MORALITY

The renewed interest in individual and group morality expressed here derives from a program of research that seeks to identify the antecedents of interindividual–intergroup discontinuity—the tendency in mixed-motive situations, such as the prisoner’s dilemma game (PDG), for intergroup interactions to be more competitive than are interindividual interactions (Wildschut, Pinter, Vevea, Insko, & Schopler, 2003). The PDG involves an interaction between two sides (individuals or groups), in which each side can select a cooperative or a competitive alternative. On any single PDG trial, each side can maximize its outcomes by selecting the competitive alternative, regardless of the alternative selected by the other side. Yet when both sides select the competitive alternative they attain lower outcomes than they could have attained by both selecting the cooperative alternative. In Ridley’s (1996) words, “Broadly speaking any situation in which you are tempted to do something but know it would be a great mistake if everybody did the same thing is likely to be a prisoner’s dilemma” (pp. 55–56).

Earlier explanations of interindividual–intergroup discontinuity emphasized that the group context allows people to disregard the tenets of individual morality, either because it provides social support from competitive in-group members (Wildschut, Insko, & Gaertner, 2002) or because it pro-

vides a shield of anonymity (Schopler et al., 1995). Our affinity (and affiliation) with this perspective notwithstanding, we propose that the group context not only relaxes the constraints of individual morality but also imposes constraints of group morality. Recently, we conducted an experiment that examined this possibility (Wildschut et al., 2002, Experiment 3).

The findings reported here stem from a reanalysis of the above-referenced experiment using data from an initial personality-testing session in which participants completed a measure of guilt proneness derived from the Test of Self-Conscious Affect (Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1989). Fifty-seven participants returned for a subsequent experimental session approximately 1 week later. In each session, participants were placed in separate rooms within a larger suite of rooms and told that they were part of a five-person group that would interact with another five-person group located in an adjoining suite. In reality, no other group was present. Participants were told that they would interact with the other group in the context of a single-trial PDG and that their group's selection (cooperation or competition) would be determined by a within-group majority rule. Group members then made their individual selections under one of two conditions. In the *public* condition, participants were told that upon completion of the experiment they would meet in the suite's center to discuss their selection with the other members of their group. In the *private* condition, participants were told that upon completion of the experiment they would be dismissed separately from the laboratory. We predicted that participants who expected their selection to become public rather than remain private would experience greater concern with conforming to the standards of group morality. Conformity to the standards of group morality and, hence, intergroup competition should be greater in the public condition because only in this condition can the participants' behavior influence the way in which they are evaluated by in-group members (Insko, Smith, Alicke, Wade, & Taylor, 1985).

But what about the role of guilt proneness? Tangney (2003) considered guilt a "moral emotion" and cited various sources of evidence demonstrating that guilt "consistently motivates people in positive directions" (p. 387). There is ample reason to believe, then, that guilt proneness is associated with individual morality. But how will guilt prone individuals respond to the demands of group morality? To our knowledge there is no research that bears directly on this question—but recall Barth's disappointment with the perfectibilists of his time when, at the outbreak of World War I, most traded their ideals of universalism for the doctrines of nationalism. Based on Barth's observation we formulated the general prediction that the association between guilt proneness and intergroup competition would be stronger in the public than in the private condition because, relative to the demands of individual morality, the demands of group morality are stronger in the former than in the latter.

As predicted, intergroup competition was significantly greater in the public than in the private condition. This main effect was qualified, however, by a

significant interaction involving guilt proneness (see top panel of Fig. 56.1). Tests of simple effects indicated that the difference between public and private responding was significant when guilt proneness was high but not when it was low. Alternatively, there were descriptive tendencies for guilt proneness to be positively associated with competition in the public condition and negatively associated with competition in the private condition. The interaction for competition was tracked by significant interactions for participants' self-reported concern with maximizing in-group outcomes relative to the other group and the opposing concern with equality of outcomes (see middle and bottom panel of Fig. 56.1). Tests of simple effects indicated that, relative to private responding, public responding significantly increased concern for relative in-group outcomes and decreased concern for equality of outcomes when guilt proneness was high but not when it was low. Alternatively, whereas guilt proneness in the public condition was significantly associated with increased concern for relative in-group outcomes and decreased concern for equality of outcomes, guilt proneness in the private condition was significantly associated with decreased concern for relative in-group outcomes and increased concern for equality of outcomes.

Paradoxically, then, those who adhere closest to the tenets of individual morality may be most likely to violate these tenets as the demands of group morality become more salient. On this basis one might infer, as Ridley (1996) did, that "When Joshua killed twelve thousand heathen in a day and gave thanks to the Lord afterwards by carving the ten commandments in stone, including the phrase 'Thou shalt not kill,' he was not being hypocritical" (p. 192).

FROM PARADOX TO PROGRESS

Mindful of the 20th century bloodshed, Shklar (1957) described belief in a law of moral progress as a "contemptible form of complacency" (p. vii). Yet the opposing belief that moral progress is impossible seems equally complacent. We propose that moral progress may be achieved by resolving the paradox involving individual and group morality. According to Niebuhr (1939/1957), this is possible. "Nations," he wrote, "can and do support higher values than their own if there is a coincidence between the higher values and the impulse of survival" (p. 79). Indeed, Insko et al. (1998, 2001) demonstrated that there are circumstances when participants become aware that, in the long run, intergroup cooperation serves the group interest better than does intergroup competition.

CONCLUSIONS

We have fashioned from experimental data a bridge between social psychology and philosophy that we believe can help understand the intergroup conflicts that, just in the final decade of the 20th century, have claimed the lives of 30 million individuals and made refugees of another 45 million

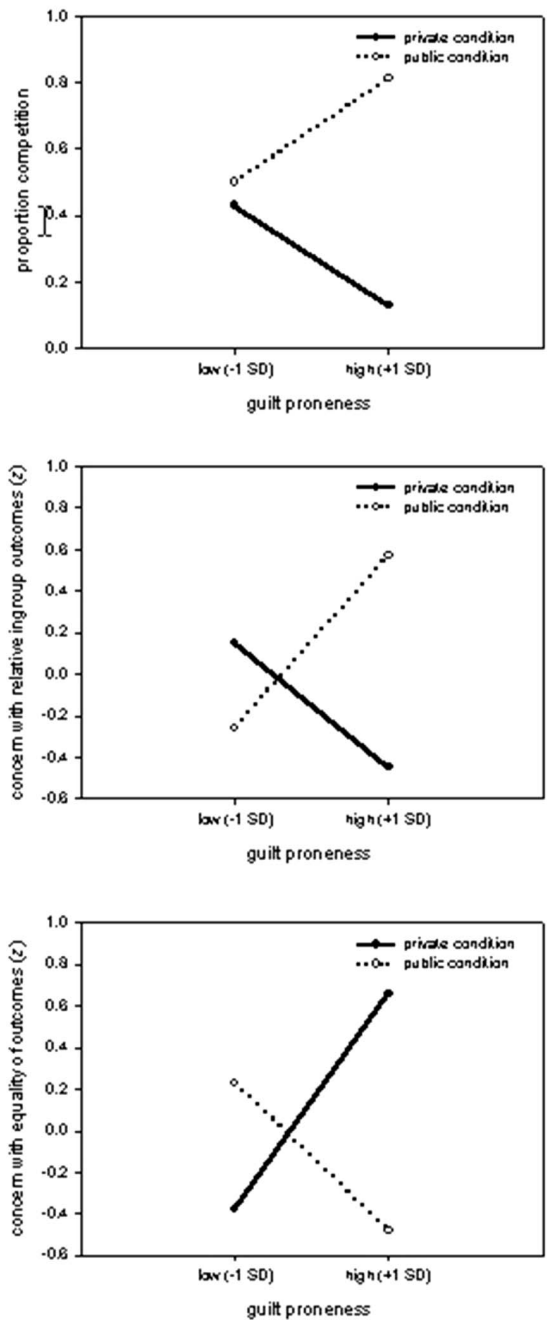


FIG. 56.1. Predicted mean levels of competition (top). Concern with maximizing relative in-group outcomes (middle), and concern with equality of outcomes (bottom) as a function of public versus private responding and guilt proneness.

(McGuire, 1998). However, we do not mean to imply that this bridge has the requisite width to accommodate the volume of interdisciplinary traffic necessary to address the many aspect of human morality. Clearly, we would be well advised to reach out to other disciplines, such as political science, sociology, anthropology, and sociobiology. On the other hand, we do believe that social psychology can profit from greater familiarity with, and awareness of, the social philosophies of the many intellectual thinkers that have come before us and also that empirical research can shed light on important philosophical issues. Perhaps this is what John Schopler was telling us all along.

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