

Review

## Deconstructing moral character judgments

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### Abstract

People often make judgments of others' moral character — an inferred moral essence that presumably predicts moral behavior. We first define moral character and explore why people make character judgments before outlining three key elements that drive character judgments: behavior (good vs. bad, norm violations, and deliberation), mind (intentions, explanations, capacities), and identity (appearance, social groups, and warmth). We also provide taxonomy of moral character that goes beyond simply good vs. evil. Drawing from the theory of dyadic morality, we outline a two-dimensional triangular space of character judgments (valence and strength/agency), with three key corners — heroes, villains, and victims. Varieties of perceived moral character include saints and demons, strivers/sinners and opportunists, the nonmoral, virtuous, and culpable victims, and pure victims.

### Addresses

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Morality, Mind perception, Social identity, Dyadic morality, Agency.

### Moral character judgments: how people make them and a taxonomy of character types

How do people perceive the moral character of others? Historically, moral psychologists have focused on how people judge the *actions* of others, but actions are performed by *people*. Moral character judgments are summary evaluations of peoples' inner 'moral essence' [1] which are perceived to drive their future moral behavior [2]: someone seen to have an evil character is expected to do evil things.

The concept of moral character dates back to Aristotle [3] but has enjoyed a modern renaissance [2,4] with initial work exploring how judgments of character differ from those of acts. In [Table 1](#), we highlight the key differences through three dimensions: scope, function, and opacity. More recent work has also explored *why* people make character judgments, and in [Box 1](#), we discuss two important reasons: our narrative-based minds [5] and the importance of identifying cooperation partners [6,7].

We now synthesize recent work to explore two questions about character. First, *how* do people make character judgments? We propose that character judgments hinge on three elements: behavior, mind, and identity. Second, what *kinds* of moral character are there? Past work has focused exclusively on good vs. evil, but work on the theory of dyadic morality [8] suggests another key dimension — strong vs. weak. Based on new work on self-perceptions of moral identity [9], we provide 'triangular taxonomy' of moral character, with points anchored by hero/protector (good & strong), villain/predator (evil & strong), and victim/prey (weak).

### How people make character judgments

Moral character judgments integrate (at least) three sources of information — someone's past behavior, their perceived mind, and their identity.

#### Behavior

Moral character judgments are about people [2], but the path to character is still paved with behavior. The most straightforward way to determine someone's moral essence is to examine what they do. Judgments of behavior come in three parts: whether the behavior was good or bad, whether it violates norms, and how much time the actor deliberates.

#### Valence

People make snap judgments about character based on whether someone's acts are good or bad. We generally assume that murderers are driven by evil moral character and that rescuers are driven by good moral character, but inferences can be more complicated. We often observe people doing many different acts [10] and so have to somehow integrate across them. There is also a powerful asymmetry such that bad behaviors are seen as more negative than good behaviors are seen as positive [11]. This means that people must do more good to have a good character than do bad to have a bad character [12]. People

<b>Judgments of character vs. acts: different elements.</b>		
Element	Acts	Character
Scope	<b>Specific:</b> Act-based judgments apply narrowly to an instance of behavior. 'That person just lied and lying is wrong.'	<b>Global:</b> Character-based judgments apply broadly to the moral essence of a person, which persists across time, place, and instances of behavior. 'That person is a liar.'
Function	<b>Making sense:</b> People judge acts after they have occurred to make sense of the past and the existing social context.	<b>Making sense and prediction:</b> Character judgments make sense of people's past actions and help anticipate a target's subsequent behavior. A dishonest person has lied to you before and is likely to lie to you in the future, prompting you to avoid them as a cooperation partner.
Opacity	<b>Transparent:</b> Acts consist of external behavior so are relatively easy to discern and evaluate. There is little need to make additional inferences. The truth is X, a target said 'not-X,' so the person lied.	<b>Opaque:</b> Character is someone's hidden moral inner essence, observable only through behavior. It therefore requires inferences beyond the situation. Even if a person lies in one a situation, they may have a good or bad moral character, depending on their intentions and reasons.

also tend to judge negative (vs. positive) actions as more deliberate, in part because they are less common [13]. The asymmetry persists even among unfulfilled actions — people judge those who fail to follow through with good intentions less positively but do not judge those who fail to follow through with bad intentions less negatively [14]. Furthermore, while people can partially compensate for their blameworthy behavior by doing good, there are diminishing returns to good behavior [15] — although doing supererogatory acts that go above and beyond (e.g., donating a kidney to a stranger) is somewhat redeeming [16\*\*].

#### *Norm violations*

Not only are behaviors good or bad but some are more normative than others. For example, both wife beating and cat beating are bad, but cat beating is more counter normative (i.e., stranger) than wife beating. Moral character judgments can hinge more on normativity than on valence, as people rate cat beaters to have worse moral character than wife beaters [17,18] — even though the act of wife beating is judged as morally worse than cat beating. Other work finds that strange acts of 'impurity' (e.g., sex with dead animals) are especially informative of moral character [19,20]. Although this link is cited as evidence for the uniqueness of both character and purity judgments [21,22], work on purity is plagued by confounds — the purity violations most

often used in research are especially bizarre [17]. Research also finds that the path from counter normative deeds to character judgments ultimately ends at inferences about harm [23]. People think that cat beaters and dead animal 'lovers' ultimately have more potential for perpetrating harm [24]. Would you trust a bestiality aficionado to babysit your kids?

#### *Deliberation*

Acts can vary on deliberation: Does someone carefully ponder their course of action or act quickly? Acts performed without deliberation (i.e., quickly and effortlessly) are typically seen as more indicative of moral character — quick decisions to be moral reflect a good person, whereas quick decisions to be immoral reflect a bad person [25]. These perceptions depend on whether perceivers think the quick decision would be endorsed by the agent if she had more time to deliberate. If people assume someone who impulsively did something bad would feel guilty about it, they judge them less harshly [26]. The one case where deliberation may actually lead to judgments of good moral character is when someone is caught between competing moral concerns (e.g., honesty vs. beneficence) [27].

#### **Mind**

Behavior is easy to observe but is an unreliable indicator of moral character. Consider judgments of someone

**Box 1. Why people make moral character judgments.****The descriptive reason: because it is how people think**

Exploring moral character is important because people naturally tell stories about their moral world with other people as characters. People generally create narratives to explain the world [5] and make sense of other people's behaviors [69] — and characters are the stars of narratives. When people witness an immoral act, they construct stories about the agent committing the act. People are also essentialists: they view others as having an enduring essence, particularly when it comes to their morality [70] and use this moral essence (i.e., character) to explain their behavior.

**The normative reason: because it is useful for predicting the future**

In our evolutionary past, our survival depended on identifying cooperative partners [6,7]. We needed to know who to befriend and who to avoid, but cooperative situations are often complex [71]. Perceiving internal essences helps to make sense of our complex world [72] and seeing another's behavior as driven by moral character helps to connect their underlying thoughts, feelings, motivations, desires, and intentions into a simple explanatory framework — they do good/evil because they *are* good/evil. Moral character perceptions therefore help reduce unwanted uncertainty [[73], M.H. Turpin *et al.*].

caught in the classic moral dilemma who decides to kill one person to save five others. On the one hand, this person may desire to save the lives of many (reflecting impartial beneficence [28]); on the other hand, this person may simply love to kill (reflecting malevolence [29]). When people make moral character judgments, they rely upon their inferences about the mind of the agent, including intentions, explanations, and capacities. Importantly, the 'problem of other minds' means that minds are ultimately a matter of perception [30].

**Intentions**

When someone does good or bad, their apparent intention can amplify or dampen the extremity of judgments [22] [31\*\*] [32\*]. For example, an intentional killer seems worse than an accidental killer. However, the consequences of an act often impact the intentions we infer behind an act — when actions result in negative side effects, people perceive the actor as having bad intentions [33]. 'Dyadic completion' — the perceptual tendency to connect the suffering of victims with the cruel intention of perpetrators — means that those who do bad acts are often perceived to have bad intentions and hence bad character [34]. Interestingly, people from 'WEIRD' (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) cultures generally assume that others have good intentions behind their behavior [35,36], so they may mistakenly view nefarious actors as trustworthy.

**Explanations**

Even when people intentionally do bad, explanations can guard their moral character against condemnation [21]. Although observers appreciate explanations, which are acceptances of responsibility along with reasons for misbehavior, they generally dismiss excuses, which deny responsibility and shift the blame onto others [37]. Accepting responsibility typically makes someone seem more credible and competent [38], but cultural and contextual factors can impact this effect — for example, Americans prefer justifications, whereas the Japanese prefer apologies [39].

**Capacities**

Not all minds are equally capable of intention, providing explanations, or even at appreciating the difference between right and wrong — a key capacity in moral character judgments. Nonhuman animals [40], self-driving cars [40], and young children [C. White *et al.*, 2021] all lack the capacity to reason about morality, and so we generally fail to make inferences about their moral character [41] [42\*] [43].

**Identity**

Character judgments hinge not only on what people do and what people seem to think but also on generally who they are. As social psychology has long documented, a person's inner essence is long filtered through their identity, including their appearance, social group, and perceived warmth.

**Appearance**

Some people look more moral than others [44]. People generally perceive those with 'baby faces' as more moral [45] and men with wide faces [46] as less moral. People rated as ugly are seen as immoral [47\*] but enhancing one's appearance with makeup also makes women seem immoral [48]. Context also matters — it is easier to judge someone as trustworthy if their face is compatible with its surroundings (trustworthy faces against neutral backgrounds) as opposed to incompatible (trustworthy faces against threatening backgrounds) [49]. Faces are not destiny however, as people will update moral character judgments once they have more relevant information [50\*].

**Social group**

When it comes to moral character, as with almost every interpersonal judgment, people rate ingroup members more positively than outgroup members [51\*] [52]. This ingroup morality effect is strengthened by collective narcissism [53]. Moral character perception also differs by the specific outgroup [54]. People are less trusting of those with different races [55], and some see homosexual people as inherently immoral [56]. People also judge the moral character of men and women using different standards [46,48,57] and are

more forgiving of moral transgressions committed by children vs. adults [C. White et al., 2021].

### *Warmth*

Judgments of morality overlap with those of warmth (i.e., likeability, trustworthiness, and helpfulness), so warm people seem more moral and moral people seem warmer [58\*\*,59]. In fact, warmth and morality are so highly correlated that it is difficult to separate them [60] explaining why cold people seem evil. However, there are successful interventions to overcome this perceived overlap, including educating people about this bias or making people justify their moral character judgments [58\*\*].

### **How behavior, mind, and identity interact**

Behavior, mind, and identity all impact each other. People make inferences about others' social group identities based on their behaviors, such as inferring that those who rely most on social support are African American [61]. People also make inferences about others' behaviors based on their identities, such as seeing an ingroup politician's behavior as serving the common good but an outgroup politician's behavior as serving egoism [62]. Similarly, mind perception differs depending on one's behavior and identity. For example, partisans dehumanize their political outgroups by claiming that they experience less complex emotions [63]. This overlap between behavior, mind, and identity means that research on the drivers of moral character must be careful of confounds.

### **A triangular taxonomy of moral character types**

Moral character is often discussed as two types: good doers and evil doers. But as the theory of dyadic morality suggests [8], good or evil *doers* typically require a *recipient* to help (for good) or harm (for evil). Villains require victims to harm, and heroes need those same victims to rescue. More technically, morality involves two dimensions — one of valence (good vs. evil) and one of agency (agents who do good/evil vs. patients who receive good/evil). Given the overlap between agency and perceived potency/strength [N. Restrepo, 2021], we suggest that there are two broad dimensions of moral character perception: valence (good versus evil) and strength (strong versus weak). Figure 1 charts out a taxonomy based on this space.

Judgments of valence are expectations about whether someone will do good or evil in the future. Those seen to have an evil (vs. good) moral character are expected to harm (vs. help) others. Importantly, these expectations should be moderated by judgments of strength such that strong characters seen as more capable of enacting their inner potential for good or evil relative to weak characters.

### **Character types**

#### *Saints and demons*

The very strongest agents (e.g., saints and demons) are expected to do good or evil no matter the circumstances or potential impediments. Of course, there may be few everyday people who are truly saints or demons, but moral character is perceived — and those we beatify and demonize are seen as completely capable of doing good (e.g., Nelson Mandela) or evil (e.g., Hitler).

#### *Strivers/sinners and opportunists*

Somewhat weaker than saints and demons are those seen as inclined toward good (strivers/sinners) or evil (opportunists) — an inclination that can be expressed or inhibited by the situation. Most people are seen as 'good people' [64] who strive for good but who can succumb to temptation — sinners who strive for righteousness. Opportunists seem intent on doing evil (e.g., a mugger) but may not accomplish their goal unless the right situation is present (e.g., a vulnerable victim walking at night).

#### *The nonmoral*

In the very middle of the space are entities seen to be neither good/evil nor strong/weak but totally nonmoral — without any kind of moral expectations. An example of an entity without any moral expectations might be an insect or a computer algorithm [65], although people may still infer some moral character in the nonmoral when they are involved in acts of harm [34].

#### *Virtuous and culpable victims*

On the weaker side of the agency/strength continuum are people who are substantially victimized by others but who are still attributed some moral agency. Virtuous victims (e.g., journalists tortured by foreign regimes) are seen as morally worthy and so their plight earns both our sympathy and respect. Culpable victims can be those who intentionally put themselves in harm way (e.g., those who make stunt videos) or those perceived to have a hand in their plight (a frequent occurrence, given the prevalence of victim blaming).

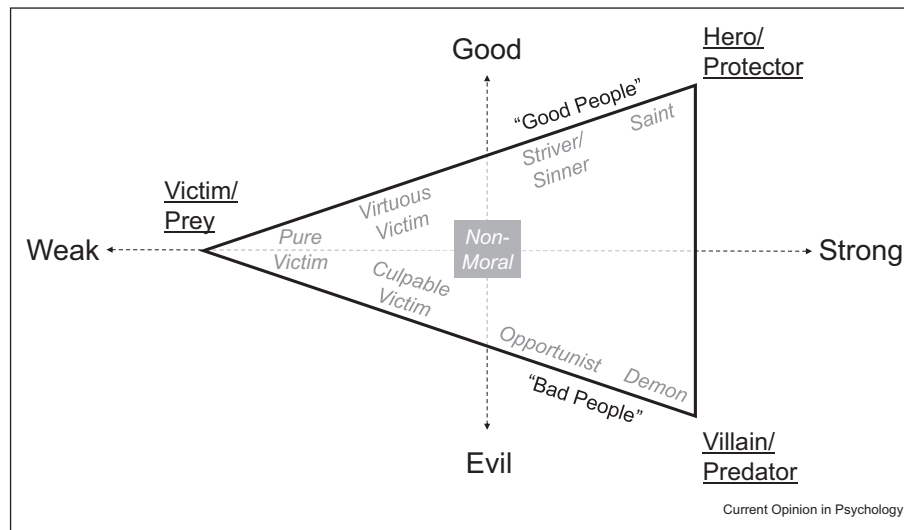
#### *Pure victims*

At the furthest end of weakness are victims who are seen as merely the recipients of (im)moral deeds. Pure victims are those whose intentions for good or evil are seen as totally irrelevant or — more often — are those seen to completely lack moral agency, such as infants and animals. Pure victims have the capacity to suffer but not act. They are the passive human canvas upon which good and evil are painted.

### **A triangular taxonomy?**

The taxonomy of character types combines the two dimensions of valence and strength/agency, so why is the structure a triangle instead of a full  $2 \times 2$  square? It is

Figure 1



A taxonomy of moral character types plotted on the two dimensions of valence (good vs. evil) and strength/agency (strong vs. weak).

because victims are merely the recipient of good or evil, without being either good or evil themselves. This shape is also consistent with work on moral typecasting [66], which argues that we typecast others into enduring moral roles as either good agents, evil agents, or as merely the recipient of (im)moral deeds.

Support for the triangle of moral character comes from a series of studies [9] in which people rated their moral identity (i.e., their self-perceived moral character). Data-driven analyses revealed only three vertices — hero/protector, villain/predator, and victim/prey—in the shape of moral character self-perceptions. These self-perceptions are also connected with people's career choices and converge with other personality dimensions [9].

Not only is this triangular taxonomy consistent with psychotherapeutic frameworks [67], it can also help explain quirks of moral character judgments. When someone does evil under situational constraints, they are seen as bad but — because they seem to lack agency — they are judged as less immoral [68]. When someone is victimized, we see their subsequent immoral behavior as less blameworthy and less indicative of bad moral character [66]. Despite its consistency with ample past work, future research should more deeply evaluate this taxonomy.

### Combining the mechanisms and kinds of moral character

We have deconstructed moral character judgments, and future work should investigate how these elements all connect. Moral character judgments are dynamic,

continuously updating based on the target's past behavior, identity, and their perceived capacities. Importantly, how do the drivers of moral character judgments (behavior, mind, identity) connect with the triangular taxonomy of character kinds? Some social groups are likely seen as morally 'weaker,' intentions likely matter more for agents than for victims, and thoughtful deliberation likely turns someone into an agent. It is worth noting that people are not perceived in isolation. If someone associates with evil people, they could seem especially evil (if high in agency/strength) or more of a victim (if low on agency/strength).

### Conclusion

It seems obvious that people make summary judgments of others' moral character but less obvious is how exactly they make those judgments. We suggest that people rely upon behavior, identity, and perceived mind when inferring the moral essence of others. We acknowledge that this list is certainly incomplete and will be expanded with future research. One key area of expansion explored here is the importance of perceived strength/agency in character judgments, which helps provide a triangular taxonomy of character types. Whatever the exact varieties and drivers of moral character judgments, these judgments are clearly an important foundation of social life.

### Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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\* of special interest

\*\* of outstanding interest

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