Why is there evil? Why do people do immoral things? How do people judge whether an act is right or wrong? How does virtue emerge, even in difficult times?

These questions have been addressed in the research on good and evil covered in this volume and at the Herzliya conference on which this book is based. The psychology of morality may have languished for a time, but it has recently entered an exciting phase full of new ideas and methods. The chapters in this volume capture much of that excitement, just as they cover many of these ideas and methods.

This concluding chapter reflects on the work presented at the conference as a window on this newly emerging science of morality. It seeks to glean some insights into where the field is, where it seems to be going, and what additional directions deserve consideration.

**Perceiving versus Doing Evil**

Since the dawn of history, people have agreed that there is evil in the world, and some of it comes about by human actions. But as observers such as Staub (this volume), Skitka (this volume), and Baumeister (this volume) have emphasized, most people who do evil do not regard their own actions as evil. In comic books and other mythical imaginings, some people knowingly dedicate themselves to evil (e.g., Dr. Evil, The Brotherhood of Evil Mutants), but this is seldom true of the real people known to psychological science.
As Baumeister (1997) concluded, this split between perception and action changes the problem for the social scientist. The age-old question of “Why is there evil?” becomes “Why do some people do things that other people perceive as evil?” As a result, research must grapple with two separate problems. One involves perception and judgment: How do people make moral judgments about right and wrong? The other involves the causation of evil: What makes people carry out violent, cruel, or otherwise immoral acts?

Happily (if that is the right word, at least in the context of scientific progress), researchers are at work on both problems. The topic of moral judgment is thriving, such as in work by Cushman and Greene (this volume), Bloom (this volume), Eyal and Liberman (this volume), and Pizarro and Tannenbaum (this volume). Meanwhile, others have focused on the causation of violent and other immoral acts, such as in talks by Staub (this volume), Graham and Haidt (this volume), Hirschberger and Pyszczynski (this volume), and in the large and continually expanding literature on aggression represented by the preceding year’s conference and volume (Mikulincer & Shaver, in press). Below we reflect on how this work has illuminated moral processes within and between individuals, and within and between groups.

**Intrapsychic Processes: Morality in One Person**

Plenty of interesting work has focused on the inner processes associated with morality. Ditto and Liu (this volume) explained that the distinction between factual beliefs and moral opinions is often blurred and even deliberately fudged, insofar as people will selectively recruit facts that support their moral opinions. In light of their findings, the assumption that people first study the facts and then construct their moral judgments about them is highly unrealistic.

Indeed, the possibility that moral judgments are often made on an intuitive, emotional, and automatic basis (Haidt, 2001) has become central in current moral psychology. The role of
moral reasoning is therefore in question. For decades, psychologists studied moral reasoning on the assumption that it guides and informs choices, but that is no longer tenable. Yet neither is it viable to dismiss moral reasoning entirely. The field is grappling with the problem of how the conscious processes of moral reasoning interacts with the intuitive and emotional bases of moral judgments.

The foundations of intuitive moral judgments were explored and explicated by Graham and Haidt (this volume), who proposed that there are approximately five such foundations: Harm/care, Fairness/reciprocity, Ingroup/loyalty, Authority/respect, and Purity/sanctity. Violations of these principles can elicit moral condemnation in people, but not all five are equally important to all people. Liberals tend to emphasize the first two, whereas all five are about equally important to conservatives. That helps explain why liberals and conservatives tend to see each other’s judgments and actions as morally deficient while believing firmly in their own morality (see also Janoff-Bulman, this volume; Skitka, this volume; Ditto & Liu, this volume).

Individual differences in morality were a theme that echoed through many approaches. Walker, Frimer, and Dunlop (this volume) compared people who received Canada’s highest moral honors for heroism and compassion against a matched sample of ordinary people who did not win such awards. Three clusters of highly moral persons emerged. One was marked by strongly communal values of caring about others. A second was marked by a tendency to think and deliberate in their actions (which suggests that moral reasoning may inform some personalities and some action patterns after all). A third was remarkably ordinary, differing in no apparent way from the morally average citizens. This last cluster contained many persons who had been recognized for single heroic actions. The implication is that single acts of heroism may
emerge mainly from situations and isolated impulses rather than from a particularly outstanding
or rare sort of character or personality.

Other traits that have productively attracted the attention of morality researchers include
attachment style (Shaver & Mikulincer, this volume) and obsessive-compulsive disorder, which
is characterized in part by a preoccupation with one’s own immoral thoughts and actions (Doron,
Sar-El, & Mikulincer, this volume). Cultural differences in both moral and non-moral values
were noted by Sverdlik, Roccas, and Sagiv (this volume).

The topic of self-deception has been of perennial interest in psychology, and moral
psychology has much to contribute. Scientists are studying how people rationalize immoral
actions. People can cheat yet continue thinking of themselves as good, honest people, such as by
mentally shuffling contexts. Sometimes they even find moral bases for dishonest actions. Ayal
and Gino (this volume) provided evidence of “altruistic cheating.” People cheat more to benefit
someone else than to benefit themselves, at least under certain circumstances. Thus, the
assumption that cheating is borne of pure self-interest is not tenable. Friendly communication
among group members increased the extent to which people cheated for the benefit of other
group members.

Some of the most creative methods and ideas on moral hypocrisy were provided by
Monin and Merritt (this volume). Hypocrisy and inconsistency are not entirely the same thing,
though they overlap. In the “sucker-to-saint” effect (Jordan & Monin, 2008), people who have
suffered some disadvantage or relative setback that constitutes a blow to their positive self-image
can convert it into a positive source of moral credit by explaining it to themselves as a sign of
their virtue. “I failed to get ahead not because I’m a fool, but because I’m a good person who
doesn’t cheat or take short-cuts.” In this light, moral outrage at others’ actions might often be
what H. G. Wells called “jealousy with a halo.”

Moral actions leave all sorts of effects on the individual. Pearlman (this volume) noted that both perpetrators and victims can feel themselves outside the normal moral order as a result of the transgression. That is, perpetrators feel they have done something wrong, and victims infer there must be something immoral about them to cause them to have deserved what befell them. Meanwhile, Gray and Wegner (this volume) reported that doing morally good – or, especially, morally bad – things can increase agentic feelings of personal strength and lead to better performance on feats of physical strength and endurance.

**Dyadic Processes: Morality between Individuals**

Much of moral life is interpersonal and serves to regulate how two people treat each other. Gray and Wegner (this volume) provided some impressive evidence that moral relations can have an essentially dyadic structure. They termed the two roles agent and patient. The essence of moral action is that one person does something to another, such as when a hero helps a victim, or a villain harms one. Reading moral meanings into non-dyadic actions often involves inferring or constructing an agent, such as when people infer that God must have intentionally caused some natural disaster.

The roles of victim and perpetrator are both essential to interpersonal harm, which nearly all of the chapter authors took as the point of departure for understanding morality (see especially Graham & Haidt, this volume, on the various dichotomies of moral sacredness vs. evil). Baumeister (this volume) contended that these two roles are powerfully motivating. He alluded to his earlier work in which participants wrote stories about transgressions from victim and perpetrator perspectives. Despite the fact that these stories were furnished by the same people on the same occasion, the stories had many systematic differences, such as time frame,
accounting for perpetrator intention, victim responsibility, and degree of external causation. Immoral, violent, evil actions seem quite different according to whether one takes the victim’s or the perpetrator’s perspective.

Interpersonal contexts and meanings change the physical effects of moral actions. Gray and Wegner (this volume) mentioned their remarkable findings that people’s subjective experience of pain changes depending on interpersonal context, even though the objective physical stimulus is precisely the same. If the pain comes as a result of an intentional act by someone else — that is, someone deliberately tried to hurt you, the subjective feeling is more intense than if the pain was accidentally caused by a person or was administered by a machine or computer. Moral meanings seep into physical reality. This echoes Ditto and Liu’s (this volume) point that moral meanings alter people’s subjective relations to physical facts.

Indeed, the very purpose and function of moral judgments may be to assess the character of other people, so as to inform how one relates to them in the future. Pizarro and Tannenbaum (this volume) challenged the conventional wisdom that moral judgments are mainly evaluations of specific actions. True, people pass judgments about acts, but the purpose of these judgments is to build coherent and reliable understandings of the people who perform those acts. After all, once an act has occurred, there may be little pragmatic value to ruminating about it or evaluating it. But learning about what kind of person the actor is can be of great help in knowing whether to trust that person subsequently and whether to build a relationship or avoid that person henceforth.

The view of moral judgment as a means of attributing important character traits to others helps make sense of many seeming exceptions and complications in the moral judgment literature, as Pizarro and Tannenbaum (this volume) explain. People judge not only the action
and the intention but how the decision was made. Someone who does the right thing for the wrong reason or in the wrong manner is still condemned. For example, sometimes it is necessary to harm someone for the greater good, such as in the much-discussed trolley problem, but people are supposed to perform such acts with appropriate dismay, hesitation, and remorse.

The remarkable findings reported by Bloom (this volume) suggested that people begin to form moral judgments of others quite early in life. Six-month-old babies can apparently distinguish between helpers and hurters, and they alter how they treat those agents accordingly. These processes escalate and become impressively sophisticated in the first years of life. Small children generally dislike broccoli, but some of them will eat broccoli to prevent it from being eaten by someone who wants it — if they think that person is immoral.

The dyadic nature of psychotherapy provided an entry point for a discussion of the moral dimensions of clinical work by Pearlman (this volume), who carefully noted the link between having been victimized oneself and later becoming an immoral agent who victimizes others. And of course, attachment theory is one of the most influential and successful theories in all of psychology about one-to-one relationships. Shaver and Mikulincer’s groundbreaking work linking attachment styles to moral behavior is essential to a full understanding of morality in dyads. In their chapter they explore ways to distinguish authentically moral behavior from superficially similar behavior motivated by efforts to improve one’s self-image.

**Intragroup Processes: Morality within Social Groups**

It is appropriate and probably inevitable that much research examines morality in relation to one person’s judgments or two people’s interactions, but moral rules have developed mainly in the context of social groups. Morality enables groups of people to live together in peace and harmony. It deals with the conflicts that are an inevitable feature of social life. Most animals
have only aggression to resolve such conflicts, but human culture uses moral rules and laws to resolve them (Baumeister, 2005). Indeed, Friedman (2002) proposed that laws and morals serve the same function, namely to restrain selfish and self-interested behavior so as to make harmonious social life in groups possible. The difference, according to Friedman, is that morality relies on long-term relationships that make people care about the opinions of others. As populations expand and social relations become more transient, people have to rely more and more on laws instead of morals. Even in modern big cities with millions of people, where the rule of law is essential for regulating many social interactions, people still use moral pressures to regulate interactions in the context of long-term relationships, such as within families and among friends.

This emphasis on restraining individual self-interest to make group life possible is echoed in the definition of morality offered by Graham and Haidt (this volume). The five foundations of morality all seem aimed at regulating group life. To be sure, the two values emphasized by liberals (avoiding harm, and fairness) could be understood in exclusively dyadic terms, though cultures certainly also benefit from them. But the three values recognized by conservatives (loyalty to ingroups, respect for authorities and traditions, and physical/spiritual purity) are only fully realized in larger social systems. One could speculate on that basis that liberals are more attuned to one-to-one interactions and the needs of individuals, whereas conservatives are more attuned to the functions and needs of larger social systems. This line of interpretation gains plausibility from Janoff-Bulman’s (this volume) finding that liberal morality is more often prescriptive (focused on what one should do) and conservative morality more often proscriptive (focused on what one should not do).

One might expect sociologists and anthropologists rather than psychologists to lead the
way in explicating how morality functions in social systems. Still, the cultural perspective is evident in many of the contributions to this volume, including those by Skitka (this volume), Hirshberger and Pyszczynski (this volume), Haslam, Bastian, Laham, and Loughnan (this volume), Pizarro and Tannenbaum (this volume), Bloom (this volume), and especially Sverdlik et al. (this volume).

**Intergroup Processes: Morality between Social Groups**

The conference took place in the Middle East, where intergroup relations have had a long and difficult history, and where conflicts between groups remain at the forefront of most citizens’ everyday awareness. Intergroup relations crept into many talks at the Herzliya conference and sometimes were central. In fact, “How would you apply these findings to the Israeli-Palestinian situation?” was a common focus of the conference’s question-and-answer sessions (usually to the consternation of the speaker expected to provide an answer worthy of King Solomon).

If morals are essentially located in the culture or social group, then relationships between groups are inherently problematic. One cannot assume that other groups share the same moral values and principles, though some thinkers (such as Staub, this volume) have sought to establish universal moral principles in light of moral atrocities such as the Holocaust and other genocides. In times of conflict, moral obligations of loyalty to one’s own group may easily conflict with impulses to treat members of other groups fairly and avoid harming them (see Graham & Haidt, this volume; Haslam et al., this volume).

Political conflicts occur between groups that are part of larger groups. Many speakers expressed prejudicial and even hostile attitudes toward people who belong to rival political groups within their country or ethnicity (with conservatives bearing the brunt of the hostility).
Such comments reflect the struggles that even morality researchers have with the conflict between ideals of universal tolerance and fairness, on the one hand, and intergroup disagreements on the other. On a hopeful note, Skitka (this volume) noted that although America’s Republicans and Democrats disagree, they generally respect the American democratic process and generally abide by outcomes that they find disagreeable, such as election losses or Supreme Court rulings.

The many allusions to politics seemed unusual to us, especially in comparison with other psychological conferences. Political discourse has clearly become an important area for the application of theories and research in moral psychology. Just as conflict between individuals is inevitable in social life, so is conflict between groups. In both cases, limited resources and competing interests make conflict resolution difficult. In nature, aggression is almost the only means of establishing dominance and resolving such conflicts, but human culture permits discussion, negotiation, compromise, and other non-lethal means. For that to happen, however, the parties must be able to present their case on some basis that both sides can agree on, and morality is one such basis. Without morality, political discourse may be little more than an assertion of one’s own interests and preferences. At the same time, as many of the talks at the Herzliya conference showed, different intuitions about or emphases in moral values and convictions can sometimes exacerbate, rather than resolve, political and other intergroup conflicts (see Skitka, this volume, Ditto & Liu, this volume, Graham & Haidt, this volume, and Janoff-Bulman, this volume).

**Cognitive and Emotional Processes**

There is little sign in these pages of the Kohlbergian approach to moral reasoning that dominated the psychology of morality for decades. Yet that does not mean that cognition is
absent. On the contrary, today’s morality researchers are bringing to bear many of the new theories about social cognition. What may seem business as usual to some social psychologists is a new page in the study of morality.

Moral judgments are influenced by a broad assortment of cognitive processes. Priming people with one sort of idea influences how they think about what comes to them next. So their responses to moral dilemmas are swayed by whatever they were previously thinking about, as shown in studies by Ditto and Liu (this volume) and Cushman and Greene (this volume). Priming people with thoughts of death changes their moral judgments, often causing harsher judgments — yet sometimes boosting approval of violent acts on behalf of one’s own group (Hirschberger & Pyszczynski, this volume). Priming people with creativity makes them become more creative in rationalizing their own dishonest behavior (Ayal & Gino, this volume).

Mental states influence judgments, too. Studies based on construal level theory show that thinking of things in higher-level terms with long time spans produces different moral judgments from thinking of things in immediate, concrete terms (Eyal & Liberman, this volume). Importantly, this difference between abstract, high-level thoughts and concrete, low-level ones is reflected in moral emotions, such as whether guilt or shame is felt, and moral rules, such as whether actions are prescribed or proscribed (Janoff-Bulman, this volume). This is another important response to Haidt’s position that moral judgments depend on emotional intuitions more than cognitive responses. Although the power of initial affective responses is undeniable, cognition may come along later and play a decisive role.

In other words, moral judgment emerges from a complex interplay of emotional intuition and reasoning. This is a major theme of Bloom’s (this volume) contribution. He discusses how moral reactions are often driven by gut impulses and quick emotional responses, which can be
discerned even in the first year of life. Yet with increasing maturity, sophisticated moral reasoning and information from narratives refines and informs these reactions. Bloom’s notion of moral progress throughout history, characterized by long-term downward trends in violence and bigotry, suggests interactions between moral intuitions and reasoning at societal as well as individual levels of analysis. Monin (this volume) likewise stressed the interplay of affective and motivational forces with reasoning, as Ditto and Liu (this volume) also did in a different way. Cushman and Greene (this volume) showed that even the principled moral reasoning of people with PhDs in ethical philosophy can be affected by philosophically irrelevant (but emotionally impactful) order manipulations of moral dilemmas. Assor (this volume) discussed a continuum of moral motivations ranging from autonomous to controlled, and he highlighted the positive well-being and behavioral effects of an integrated form of moral motivation. Together, works such as these have helped move the field forward to a new paradigm. The long dominant emphasis on abstract moral reasoning (the Kohlbergian tradition) was radically challenged by Haidt’s emphasis on moral intuition. Instead of seeing these as rival explanations, the new generation of morality researchers is grooping for a way to understand how they complement each other.

**Notably Missing**

Morality is one of the fundamental dimensions of human social life. It would be unrealistic to expect any conference or volume to address all aspects of it. Still, it might be worth noting some important aspects of moral life that deserve more attention than they received in this compilation, excellent as it is.

Nearly all the speakers treated morality in terms of one person harming another. In some cases, that was the explicit and exclusive focus (e.g., Staub, this volume), whereas in others, it
was implicit. But it is not the only meaning of morality.

Sexual morality was almost never mentioned at the conference. Yet it is an important dimension of morality for most people. Moreover, it is one that may reflect principles and processes that are different from harm-based morality (Young & Saxe, 2010). All known societies regulate sexual behavior to some extent, not least because societies and cultures must manage reproduction effectively in order to continue existing and to compete with their neighbors and rivals. Historically, military and economic competition between cultures has often been resolved in favor of the larger group, and so having more bodies is vital. Other factors also contribute to a culture’s interest in controlling sexuality with moral rules, such as the jealousies, violent conflicts, scandals, diseases, and symbolic impurities associated with sexual misdeeds.

An anecdote may be relevant. When seeking to fly home after the conference, Graham was held up for a while by airport security personnel, who asked him many questions about what he was doing in Israel and eventually had him get out his laptop, open PowerPoint, and reiterate the gist of his conference presentation. When he got to the part about Purity (with photos of S&M sex club patrons), they told him that as an American his views about morality differed from those of Israelis, particularly insofar as Israelis lacked the concern with sexual morality that Americans had (or so they opined). He concurred that cross-cultural differences were important and was soon on his way. Still, if the security officers were correct that sexual morality is of minor concern to Israelis relative to Americans and to members of many other cultures, there may be a valid cultural reason. Most cultures depend heavily on managing sex to sustain and increase their populations. Israel, however, has seen its population swell by immigration, and indeed many Israeli scholars at the conference noted how their society was still integrating the influx of over a million Russian immigrants (over 10% of the population) in barely a decade. The
massive immigration may explain the lesser preoccupation with moralizing sex. Although the United States also deals with high immigration rates, it is possible that American culture-war debates over sexual issues such as gay marriage may reflect unique cultural aspects of America’s Puritan roots (Uhlmann, Poehlman, & Bargh, 2009).

Interpersonal harm is generally and everywhere the predominant meaning of evil. Baumeister (1997, this volume) noted, however, that there has been a secondary meaning, which is chaos and disorder. Life is change — but nearly all living things yearn for stability, including a regular, harmonious, and predictable environment. The loss of this peaceful and predictable order is an important form of evil that moral psychology has largely neglected (see also Graham & Haidt, this volume, Table 1, on different shared perceptions of evil based on different foundational concerns).

The links between morality and religion received brief mention here and there during the conference, but they have not received research attention commensurate with their historical and cross-cultural importance. For many people, morality is scarcely feasible without a foundation in religious values. The secular foundations of morality remain tentative and problematic, whereas for people with strong religious beliefs, morals obviously come from their god.

Pizarro and Tannenbaum (this volume) made a powerful argument that evaluations of character are central to moral judgment, even though moral philosophers and moral psychologists have concentrated more on evaluations of acts. A similarly compelling (and potentially field-changing) argument has been put forth by neuro-philosopher Patricia Churchland (in press). Although most studies of morality posit moral rules that are either broken or not, human morality may in fact be more reliant on prototypes: A current situation may be evaluated based on its general similarities to one or more moral prototypes, in the absence of any
specific moral rule governing what should be done in that situation (Churchland, in press). The psychological differences between prototype-based and rule-based moral judgment processes seem a fertile ground for future morality research.

The grand perennial question of free will has recently emerged as a fascinating and controversial topic for psychological research. It too was not mentioned at the conference – an unfortunate omission, though it did get some lively informal discussion among the conference attendees. There are many definitions of free will, only some of which are scientifically viable and tractable. (Our usage of the term is not intended to invoke any supernatural or noncausal meaning.) At a basic level, however, free will means that a person could do different things in a particular situation, and moral and legal codes are based on that assumption. When laypersons come to disbelieve in free will, they seem to abandon their moral sensitivity (e.g., Vohs & Schooler, 2008). The very purpose of morality is presumably to encourage people to use their powers of choice to perform one sort of action rather than another, and thus it essentially assumes that good and evil actions are both possible. Future research and theory about morality seems likely to be drawn into the free will debate, and may make unexpected yet profound contributions to it.

Indeed, the possibility that a person could respond to a given situation in different ways is essential to the understanding of morality. The moral dilemmas studied by morality researchers (such as those described by Cushman & Greene, this volume) typically rest on the assumption that more than one action is possible. One way to understand these developments is that as consciousness evolved to become social and gained the capacity to simulate non-present realities, it became able to imagine multiple alternative possibilities. Free will refers to the set of psychological capabilities that evolved to deal with such situations by implementing one set of
outcomes rather than other, less desirable outcomes. These include self-control, rational choice, and intentional planning. All of these are highly relevant to both moral action (which often entails resisting temptations and antisocial impulses) and to moral judgment (where assessments of intention may substantially affect moral judgments; see Pizarro and Tannenbaum, this volume). Morality in particular tends to advocate prosocial actions that may require sacrificing selfish advantage.

By extending their purview to address such issues, morality researchers may make contact with such perennial themes in social psychology as choice and impulse control. If the conference talks are any indication, issues of conscious versus unconscious processes will also be central to such a development.

**Bottom Line**

The psychology of morality may have languished as an uninspiring backwater for several decades — but that has changed dramatically in recent years. Psychologists will have to watch this area for exciting growth and development in the coming years. A deeper and more profound understanding of human morality is emerging. The chapters in this book are a sign of new developments and even greater things to come.
References


