Psychoanalytic Psychology

New Developments in Understanding Morality: Between Evolutionary Psychology, Developmental Psychology, and Control-Mastery Theory

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New Developments in Understanding Morality: Between Evolutionary Psychology, Developmental Psychology, and Control-Mastery Theory

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The aim of this article is to present an overview of several recently proposed hypotheses about the development of morality and guilt during the evolution of our species and the individual psychic development. The article will show how group selection seems to have favored the development of prosocial motivations, emotions, and skills, which are the basis of “moral” judgments and behaviors, and how the specific experiences of each individual and her/his belonging to a specific culture shape this first moral innate “draft.” We will then review relevant empirical data about the development of guilt in infancy and early childhood from empathic concern and the tendency to feel responsible for other people’s wellbeing, and the temperamental and environmental factors at the basis of adaptive and maladaptive guilt. Finally, we will show the substantial compatibility between these recently developed hypotheses and data and the hypotheses developed by the Control-Mastery theory starting from clinical observation and from the ideas of several psychoanalytic authors.

Keywords: morality, group-selection, guilt, control-mastery theory

Recent studies from an evolutionary and moral-psychology perspective (Sober & Wilson, 1998; Tomasello, 2016; D. S. Wilson, 2015; E. O. Wilson, 2012) suggest that the evolution of human morality followed the evolution of complex cooperative skills. Group selection, in fact, has favored the emergence of abilities and emotions that guarantee cohesion within groups and the emergence of individuals who are intuitively and emotionally sensitive to a wide range of “moral principles” (Haidt, 2012).

From an ontogenetical point of view, this moral sensitivity is inborn and connected with relational competencies such as the ability to experience empathic concern for other people, to feel responsible for their wellbeing, to understand the inner state of others, and to display prosocial behaviors (Davidov, Zahn-Waxler, Roth-Hanania, & Knafo, 2013; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990). This moral sensitivity is then shaped by the cultural norms learned within the interpersonal context in which the individual grows up.

Among moral emotions, we will focus primarily on guilt, on its ontogenetic development, on the temperamental and environmental factors affecting its evolution, and on its association with internalizing and externalizing problems when a person feels a maladaptive and exaggerated sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of others in situations that cannot be controlled or repaired.

Finally, we will show how control-mastery theory (CMT; Gazzillo, 2016; Silberschatz, 2005; Weiss, 1986, 1993), a cognitive-dynamic relational theory developed over the last 40 years by the San Francisco Psychotherapy Research Group, is in line with contemporary knowledge about morality and guilt and allows us to better understand several clinical manifestations of unconscious maladaptive guilt and their developmental roots.

The Evolutionary Basis of Human Morality

In recent decades, research on moral development has been increasingly influenced by an evolutionary perspective (Engelmann & Tomasello, 2018). Numerous studies (e.g., Davidov, Zahn-Waxler, Roth-Hanania, & Knafo, 2013; Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2010; Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010) reveal that from a very young age, human beings show skills, motivations, and emotions that allow them to express “moral” judgments and make morally relevant choices. This suggests that moral functioning can no longer be considered a mere outcome of emotional and cognitive development and of socialization practices, but it is at least partially the result of processes of natural selection.

Cooperation and altruism, and their uniquely human companion known as morality, have long been a mystery for the theory of...