BEING GOOD FOR GOODNESS' SAKE:
Transcendence in the Lives of Moral Heroes

MORAL PSYCHOLOGY'S BLIND-SPOT

Moral psychology suffers from a grievous blind-spot. Strangely occluded from its vision is a consideration of the potential relevance of religion, spirituality, and transcendent faith to moral functioning. Kohlberg (1967) instigated and did much to perpetuate this secular skew within moral psychology and education with his insist-ent claim that the moral and religious domains were independent. Undoubtedly, this stance was partly motivated by the perceived need to legitimize the psychological study of morality in an antagonistic intellectual context which, at the time, widely embraced behaviorism, secular humanism, and ethical relativism. Additionally, the American constitutional requirement of separation of church and state precluded any vestige of religious influence on moral/character education programs in public schools. However, at some juncture, political and pragmatic concerns must be put aside for an impartial and open-minded investigation of the topic. The integrity of the field is on the line; investigation ought to proceed along conceptual and empirical lines, not merely ideological ones.

It is not difficult to mount the case that the domains of religion, spirituality, and faith, on the one hand (henceforth collectively referred to as transcendence), and morality, on the other hand, are intertwined in meaningful ways. However, transcendence and morality undoubtedly entail a complex relationship, one that will become increasingly apparent as this chapter unfolds. First, let us consider one direction of influence — the path from transcendence to moral functioning. All religious and spiritual traditions reference not only the vertical dimension of relating to the divine or the transcendent, but they also reference the horizontal dimension in providing explicitly moral guidelines for living a good life and interacting appropriately with others. So it would appear that religion directs and motivates individuals to moral ways of living. Indeed, history abounds with instances where religion justifies some of the most profound instances of morality (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi).

Yet, history also abounds with counter-examples, with instances of heinous im-morality (e.g., the Crusades, religious terrorism) wherein religious motivation has gone terribly awry. This is simply a preliminary indication of the complexity of the relationship that is our focus here. The way in which transcendence informs moral
moral or immoral these judgments are in actuality, thus, it could be expected that transcendence would be associated with a considerable range of moral outcomes, both positive and negative. On the flip side, Proposition 2 is that there are various groundings for mature moral functioning, not only transcendent but also secular. Thus, we posit that, although morality may lead some individuals to concerns about transcendence, it will not do so for everyone.

In this chapter, we will begin by running a naturalistic check on our theorizing by asking whether ordinary folk conceptions concur with our framing of the relationship between transcendence and moral functioning. Then we will explore what appears to be the more obvious of the two accounts (that transcendence leads individuals to morality) with a review of some pertinent research. And finally, we will address the more difficult subject of whether or not morality necessarily leads to transcendence with the presentation of some new data that speak to the issue.

CONCEPTIONS OF THE DOMAINS

As a preliminary check on our conceptual framing of the relationship between transcendence and moral functioning, we begin by exploring naturalistic conceptions. Folk conceptions are important to examine for at least two reasons. One reason is that such conceptions do play a causal role in people's daily decision-making, emotions, and behaviors, and thus are important in explaining their psychological functioning. The second reason is that these ordinary conceptions can provide a check on the conceptual skewing that is inherent in philosophical perspectives. Flanagan (1991), for example, has advanced the notion of minimal psychological realism which holds that ethical theories need to be informed by an empirical account of how people understand morality and of the psychological processes involved in moral functioning. Note that this approach does not claim that folk understandings are necessarily correct; indeed, they may be in gross error. However, when there is some divergence between expert and folk conceptions (or between theory and data), it calls for some explanation and at least signals the possibility that our conceptual models may be askew.

An initial study of folk conceptions asked participants, in the context of a larger project (Walker, Pitts, Hennig, & Matsuba, 1995), to identify people whom they regarded as highly moral and to justify these nominations. Their nominations were not constrained by any preset criteria and so nominees could be historical figures or people known only personally. A content analysis of the types of moral exemplars named revealed not only the predictable categories of humanitarians, social activists, revolutionaries, and exceptional politicians, but also a sizable category comprised of religious founders (e.g., Jesus, Mohammed) and religious leaders (e.g., the pope, a chaplain). This was surprising because the instructions to participants were explicit in prompting for moral exemplars. Numerous other religious figures were also named (e.g., Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu) but were classified into other categories given the nature of the justifications that participants provided for their
nominations. For the present purposes, the take-home message here is that people’s moral heroes are frequently religious figures.

Another content analysis examined the characteristics attributed to these moral exemplars by participants to justify their nominations. This analysis indicated that many exemplars were identified on the explicit basis of their religious and spiritual attributes, suggesting that for many people morality is defined in religious and spiritual terms. This provides a naturalistic confirmation of our most basic contention, that morality and transcendence overlap in meaningful ways. Next, we consider the nature of their intertwinement.

Prototype theory (Rosch, 1978) provides another way to examine the complex relationship between morality and transcendence. This approach to social cognition holds that concepts are better represented in terms of typical examples (or prototypes) identifying the core of the category than by definitional boundaries (the classical definition of concepts). Walker and Pitts (1998) used participants’ evaluations of the attributes of moral, religious, and spiritual exemplars to explore the relationships across these domains. The critical feature of these collections of attributes for the present analysis is that, across domains, some attributes are unique in characterizing a particular domain (e.g., just is unique to the moral domain and traditional to the religious domain) whereas other attributes are shared between domains (e.g., devout is shared between the religious and spiritual domains). Participants in this study were asked to rate the accuracy (or prototypicality) of these attributes in describing each type of exemplar.

Prototype theory holds that participants’ evaluations of unique versus shared attributes can help to explicate the relationships across these domains. Participants’ ratings of the unique and shared attributes indicated that these domains are indeed related, albeit in an asymmetrical pattern — and this is a critical finding for the present analysis. The unique attributes descriptive of the moral exemplar received higher prototypicality ratings, on average, than did the attributes shared with either the religious or the spiritual exemplar. This indicates that, in people’s ordinary understandings, core moral virtues and traits are relatively independent of religious and spiritual ones. In other words, to be a highly moral person, one does not necessarily need to manifest characteristics of either religiosity or spirituality.

In contrast, for both the religious and spiritual exemplars, their unique attributes received lower prototypicality ratings than the attributes shared with the moral exemplar. Obviously, their unique attributes are more peripheral to these concepts whereas their shared attributes are closer to their core meaning. This indicates that central to what it means to be a highly religious or spiritual person is the embodiment of moral virtues and traits.

The findings of Walker and Pitts’s (1998) study can be stated more bluntly: In ordinary understandings, people believe that it is more likely that someone can function in a morally mature manner but be functionally irreligious than it is that someone can be authentically religious or spiritual but characteristically immoral in their behavior. We interpret this to be consistent with our second proposition that morality may lead individuals along different paths relative to (i.e., towards, away from) the transcendent. For some, morality prompts concerns regarding the transcendent, whereas for others, morality is not necessarily implicated and has no such effect. The findings are also consistent with our first proposition that transcendence can motivate individuals to function morally. However, the data do not address the possibility that transcendence can also lead to negative moral outcomes, by imparting “divine license” to immoral motives. In the next section we explore this issue of the motivating and amplifying effects of the transcendent on moral functioning; we defer until later sections discussion of the assertion that morality may pave the way to concerns regarding transcendence.

**TRANSCENDENCE AS MORAL MOTIVATION**

William James (1902), in the era of armchair psychology, argued in his classic text, *The Varieties of Religious Experience, that the authenticity of religious faith should not be judged solely on the basis of intrapsychic experience, but also on the basis of its more objective consequences with “moral helpfulness” looming large among the evaluative criteria (Walker, 2003). James devoted a substantial proportion of *The Varieties* to an examination of the range of moral virtues that should be the practical extension of an authentic spirituality. In this section, we examine research which suggests that concerns regarding transcendence can motivate and amplify moral functioning.

In her CBC Massey Lectures, ethicist Margaret Somerville (2006) argued that connecting the self to some greater whole is a fundamental human motive. It is the intangible, immeasurable, numinous reality that all of us need to find meaning in life and to make life worth living — a deeply intuitive sense of relatedness or connectedness to all life, especially other people, to the world, and to the universe in which we live. One manifestation of the human spirit or human spirituality is the longing for transcendence — the strong desire to experience the feeling of belonging to something larger than ourselves. (pp. 7-8)

One explanation for this basic human motivation regarding transcendence is offered by terror management theory (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) which posits that the human instinct for self-preservation comes to loggerheads with the awareness of one’s own inevitable death. The clash induces a sense of terror, the reaction to which is the need to transcend one’s death by attaching the self to entities that exist beyond the self’s mortal existence (e.g., by reaffirming one’s cultural worldview).

How “longing for transcendence” manifests itself in interpersonal functioning is of particular interest for the present discussion. Not only might the need for transcendent (spirituality) directly affect the way that individuals relate to one another (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002), there may also exist an indirect relationship when the need for transcendence is expressed in the context of organized
trinomic forms of religiosity are more likely to be associated with immoral outcomes, whereas intrinsic spirituality and transcendent faith are more frequently empowering of mature moral functioning.

We now shift the discussion to begin to explore the other causal direction in this relationship - the impact of morality on concerns about transcendence. Our view is that there are various groundings for mature moral functioning; thus our second proposition is that, although morality may lead individuals to concerns about transcendence, morality does not necessarily do so.

COLBY AND DAMON'S SERENDIPITOUS FINDING

It was at the height of the Kohlbergian era—where morality was firmly demarcated from religious faith—that Colby and Damon (1992) reported the surprising and provocative finding regarding the significant role of faith and spirituality in the lives of moral exemplars (people who were engaged in extraordinary moral commitment and action). Their work was pivotal for a variety of reasons, one being that it heralded a paradigm shift from a focus on moral cognition (which had occupied the field for some time) to one that included broader aspects of moral personality and character. There was growing disillusionment with Kohlberg’s vision of moral maturity – Stage 6 principles of justice – and it was becoming increasingly apparent that moral cognition lacked sufficient explanatory power; that is, that it was only weakly predictive of moral action — what became known as the “judgment-action gap” (Blass, 1980; Walker, 2004). Single-variable models of moral functioning seemed to trivialize the domain. Other aspects of moral functioning, notably those pertaining to personality and motivation, needed to be incorporated into our theoretical perspectives. So Colby and Damon’s study of the lives of moral exemplars represented an attempt to more fully describe moral functioning and to provide a more veridical account of moral excellence.

Colby and Damon (1992) conducted a case-study analysis of a small sample of 23 people who had been identified as leading lives of extraordinary moral commitment and action. These moral exemplars were identified on the basis of the nominations of a panel of experts who formulated a set of criteria for moral excellence and then named individuals meeting these criteria. What is particularly important here about these criteria is that they made no reference to, or even had any implication of, religion, spirituality, or faith. Colby and Damon’s qualitative analyses of their interviews with these moral exemplars suggested several processes in the development and maintenance of exceptional moral character, but one finding was completely unexpected: 78% of their sample of exemplars clearly attributed the value commitments underlying their moral action to their religious faith and spirituality. This appears both to challenge Kohlberg’s (1967) strong demarcation and to contradict folk notions (Walker & Pitts, 1998) that exemplary moral functioning does not especially require a religious or spiritual foundation.

So what are the appropriate conclusions to draw from this serendipitous and
intriguing finding? Two cautionary flags need to be raised at this point. First, Colby and Damon's study entailed an "assisted autobiography" methodology and qualitative analyses; it lacked objective measures. As a consequence, without any operationalization of their concepts, it is difficult to know exactly to what they are referring. Second, they had a small sample of American exemplars with no comparison group of participants. Among Western nations (such as North America and the countries of Europe), the United States is among the most religious and so it is not obvious that the prevalence of religious belief in Colby and Damon's sample is widely divergent from what would be found in the general population. A demographically-matched comparison group is essential and would be quite informative in that regard.

The first issue pertains to the ambiguity of Colby and Damon's provocative claim regarding the role of religious faith in moral functioning. Scholars in the psychology of religion (Hill & Hood, 1999) make important and nuanced distinctions among the concepts of religiousity, spirituality, and faith which are obscured in Colby and Damon's work. Colby and Damon noted that some exemplars explicitly based their morality on their religious beliefs (associated with a formal religion), whereas other exemplars referenced a spirituality or faith that was not amenable to encapsulation in traditional religious categories. They were left to conclude that, "although the substance of the faith and its ideals was too varied and too elusive to be captured in a final generalization, it can perhaps best be described as an intimation of transcendence" (p. 311), a tantalizing but unsatisfactory conclusion. The critical distinctions among religiosity, spirituality, and faith development figure importantly in our research which we will present later in this chapter.

The second issue with the Colby and Damon study was their lack of a comparison group. This limitation was addressed in a recent study (Matsuba & Walker, 2004, 2005) which examined the psychological functioning of a sample of young-adult moral exemplars. In this study, moral exemplars were identified on the basis of extraordinary moral commitment toward various social service organizations. A comparison group of young-adult participants was also recruited, individually matched on several demographic variables. Among the various personality constructs assessed in this study was faith development.

This assessment of faith development was based on Fowler's (1981) structural-developmental model that proposes stages of faith. Fowler contends that these stages are conceptually unrelated to religiosity or religious affiliation; rather, they reflect the processes involved in individuals' meaning-making and their epistemic understanding of the transcendent. These stages can be briefly described as follows:

- **Stage 1 (intuitive-projective):** a magical, fantasy-filled period in which the young child constructs the world in a largely egocentric and episodic way.
- **Stage 2 (mythical-literal):** at this stage the child attempts to make sense of experience in narrative or concrete terms.
- **Stage 3 (synthetic-conventional):** at this stage the adolescent or adult unreflectively synthesizes and adopts the views of significant others and authorities.

- **Stage 4 (individuative-reflective):** at this stage there is the self-conscious construction of an explicit, systematic worldview.
- **Stage 5 (conjunctive):** an individual at this stage reasons in dialogical terms, embracing paradox and seeking to conjoin the truths of multiple perspectives.
- **Stage 6 (universalizing):** transcending paradox, the rare individual at this stage commits to relatedness with an all-inclusive universal community and totality of being.

The relevant finding from Matsuba and Walker's (2004) study is that their moral exemplars evidenced significantly more mature faith development than did the participants in the comparison group; and furthermore, among the large number of personality constructs assessed in this study, it was faith development that best discriminated between the exemplar and comparison groups, indicating its salience in moral functioning. There was, however, an unfortunate confound that throws the finding into some doubt: half of the exemplars were drawn from religious organizations (the other half were drawn from secular social-service organizations), whereas comparison participants were recruited from psychology classes (and the extent of their religious affiliation was not known). It is possible that the differences in faith development between moral exemplars and comparison participants might be attributable to differences in religiosity.

So, in the course of reviewing the evidence regarding the relationship between moral functioning and concerns about the transcendent, we have managed to generate numerous questions. It is in this context that we have conducted another study, examining the psychological functioning of moral exemplars, which hopefully will be more definitive in its findings.

**THE PRESENT STUDY**

There are three notable aspects to the study's design: (a) The study entailed a matched comparison group and objective methodology. (b) It compared two contrasting types of moral exemplars. (c) It assessed three different aspects of the transcendent domain—religiosity, spirituality, and faith. First, the critical importance of appropriately matched comparison groups and reliance on objective methodology has been argued earlier; there is no need for reiteration. Second, previous research (Colby & Damon, 1992; Matsuba & Walker, 2004) has focused on a single type of moral exemplar, that is, caring action in the form of committed social service. It is possible that the relationship between moral functioning and religious faith may vary across different types of moral action, so in the present study we compared two quite different types of moral exemplars: brave versus caring. Third, as we have already implied, there are important distinctions among the constructs of religiosity, spirituality, and faith that need to be fleshed out in the context of empirical research. In our understanding, religiosity refers to the creedal and ritual expressions of belief and practice associated with institutional religion; spirituality refers
to the more personal affirmation of a higher power that is beyond oneself; whereas faith refers to the process of meaning-making and an epistemic stance toward the transcendent.

Sample

The moral exemplars identified in this study were recent recipients of a national award through the Canadian honors system. Our focus was on two contrasting types of moral exemplars: brave and caring. The 25 brave exemplars were recipients of the Medal of Bravery, a civilian award which recognizes individuals who have risked their lives to save others and who have persisted in their rescue attempt despite considerable danger. The 25 caring exemplars were recipients of the Caring Canadian Award which recognizes extraordinary volunteers who have shown long-term commitment in providing care to individuals or groups, or who have supported community service or humanitarian causes. The brave and caring exemplars were demographically alike except for the fact that the caring exemplars were substantially older than the brave exemplars (mean ages were 70 vs. 41 years), a difference that was not unexpected given that the caring exemplars were being recognized for long-term service whereas brave exemplars were being recognized for rescues in dangerous contexts in which younger people are more typically involved. Comparison groups were formed of individuals drawn from the general community. They were closely matched on a case-by-case basis to the exemplar participants in terms of the demographic variables of gender, ethnicity, age, and level of education. Thus, the total N for this study was 100.

Measures

Among other measures (see Walker & Primer, in press, for a description of the larger project), participants completed two questionnaires and responded to a lengthy individual life-review interview which was conducted in their home. One of the questionnaires was the short 5-item Duke Religion Index (Koenig, Parkerson, & Meador, 1997). Two items on this self-report measure tap organizational and non-organizational religiosity (Cronbach’s α = .80) and three items tap intrinsic spirituality (α = .95).

Participants also completed the Personal Strivings List (Emmons, 1999) which assesses goal motivation by prompting people to provide a list of their personal strivings, that is, the things they are “typically or characteristically trying to do.” These strivings can be coded for the presence of various goal-motivational themes, including spiritual self-transcendence. Examination of the scoring criteria (Emmons, 1999) for this theme revealed, however, that they conflated religious, spiritual, and moral concerns, so we developed our own scoring criteria to code religious and spiritual strivings (harkening back the distinction between religion and spirituality made by James, 1902, pp. 334-335). Religious strivings were defined as ones that explicitly refer to the beliefs, attitudes, practices, experiences, commitments, and goals of recognized religion. These could entail aspects of institutional religion (e.g., attending religious services), of private religious activities (e.g., prayer), of adherence to religious teachings (e.g., the Ten Commandments), or of beliefs and attitudes (e.g., knowledge of a relationship with a deity). In contrast, spiritual strivings were defined as ones that are oriented to transcending the self. Such strivings implicitly affirm a nonmaterial reality that is above and beyond the self; they reflect an attempt to align one’s life with that reality. Spiritual strivings can take many forms, including (but not necessarily limited to) increasing one’s knowledge of a higher power or metaphysical entity, developing or maintaining a relationship with a higher power, integrating the self with a transcending totality, and attempting to exercise one’s spiritual beliefs in daily life. To assess these two categories of personal strivings (religious and spiritual), responses on participants’ lists were independently classified for the presence/absence of the relevant motivational theme. Note that the categories are not mutually exclusive: a striving may overlap both categories or may not be codeable at all. Interrater reliability was determined by the independent coding of the data of a randomly selected subsample of 25 participants and was found to be substantial, with 100% agreement for religious strivings and 99% agreement for spiritual ones (Cohen’s χ = 1.00 and .91, respectively).

Embedded within the context of the life-review interview was a lengthy series of questions tapping four aspects of faith development: (a) social perspective-taking, (b) bounds of social awareness, (c) locus of authority, and (d) form of world coherence. Participants’ responses for each aspect were matched to coding criteria given in the faith coding manual (Moseley, Jarvis, & Fowler, 1993). These scored responses were then averaged to yield a faith stage score for each aspect. Interrater reliability was determined by the independent coding of the faith interviews of 25 participants and was found to be substantial, with exact agreement in faith stage scores for each aspect ranging from 80% to 96% (and with Cohen’s χ = .78 to .96).

Note that we did not assess three other aspects of faith development (viz., form of logic, symbolic function, and form of moral judgment) described by Fowler (1981). We excluded logical and symbolic processes because of their minimal relevance to the issues of interest here and we excluded moral judgment so as not to create an artificial relationship between faith development and moral functioning. The faith coding manual (Moseley et al., 1993) does allow for the use of an abbreviated interview.

For analyses, we derived from these measures three summary indices: religiosity, spirituality, and faith development. (a) Religiosity was tapped by two scores: the overall score for extrinsic religiosity (from the Duke Religion Index) and by the frequency of religious strivings (from the Personal Strivings List). These two components of religiosity were strongly correlated (with r = .63 and p < .001); and an overall index for religiosity was generated by first standardizing each of these two scores and then averaging them. (b) Spirituality was also tapped by two scores: the overall score for intrinsic spirituality (from the Duke Religion Index) and by
the frequency of spiritual strivings (from the Personal Strivings List). These two components of spirituality were moderately correlated (with \( r = .42 \) and \( p < .001 \)); and an overall index for spirituality was generated by standardizing each of these two scores and then averaging them. (c) Finally, faith development was indexed by averaging the four aspect scores (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .84 \)). Descriptive statistics for the indices of religiosity, spirituality, and faith development are presented in Table 1 for the brave and caring exemplar groups, as well as for their matched comparison groups.

Also in the course of the life-review interview, participants were asked to recall and discuss a real-life moral dilemma from their personal experience which was scored for stage of moral reasoning development, following well-established procedures in that regard (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Walker et al., 1995). Level of moral reasoning was indexed by the weighted average score, which is given by the sum of the percent usage at each stage weighted by the stage number. Interrater reliability was ICC = .83.

**Results**

**Religiosity** In order to examine differences across the groups in religiosity, a 2 (group: exemplar, comparison) \( \times \) 2 (award: brave, caring) \( \times \) 2 (gender) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, using the standardized religiosity scores as the dependent variable. The only significant effect revealed was the award variable, \( F(1,92) = 4.06, p = .04, \eta^2 = .04 \). This relatively weak effect indicates that participants from the caring exemplar and comparison groups evidenced somewhat greater religiosity than did participants from the brave exemplar and comparison groups (\( M_s = .22 \) vs. .02). Recall that caring participants were almost a generation older than brave ones, suggesting that this effect for religiosity should be attributed to developmental or cohort factors. Indeed, there was a significant correlation between age and religiosity in this sample (\( r = .30, p = .002 \)), indicating that commitment to the beliefs, practices, and goals of institutionalized religion is more pronounced among members of the older generation. Note that this analysis revealed no differences between moral exemplars and comparison participants in religiosity.

**Spirituality** The group \( \times \) award \( \times \) gender ANOVA for spirituality revealed no significant effects, indicating that on this variable there are no group differences as well.

**Faith Development** However, the analysis for faith development revealed a main effect for group, \( F(1,92) = 8.97, p = .004, \eta^2 = .09 \), which was qualified by a group \( \times \) award interaction, \( F(1,92) = 3.87, p = .05, \eta^2 = .04 \). This interaction was examined by analyses of the simple main effects which indicated no difference in faith development between brave exemplars and their comparison group, whereas there was a substantial difference between caring exemplars and their comparison group, \( F(1,92) = 13.78, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13 \). As is evident in Table 1, the caring exemplar group evidenced a more mature level of faith development (by about one-third of a stage) than did any other group.

Thus, this study revealed group differences for faith development but not for religiosity or spirituality, suggesting that faith is tapping a somewhat different facet of the domain. This notion is confirmed by the relatively modest correlation between faith and religiosity (\( r = .15, p = .15 \)) and between faith and spirituality (\( r = .29, p = .004 \)).

So how do we interpret this finding that caring exemplars scored higher on faith development than their comparison group? The structural-developmental measure of faith indexed in this study can best be understood as a measure of epistemic development as applied to one’s worldview or understanding of the world and beyond. One possible interpretation of the evidenced relationship between faith development and moral exemplarity is that the facet of faith development that is accounting for variance in moral functioning is some feature of cognitive development as opposed to a relatedness to the transcendent. Considering that faith development was significantly correlated with stage of moral reasoning (\( r = .58, p < .001 \)), this remains a distinct possibility (see Snarey, 1991, for a discussion of the relationships between faith and moral stages).

If cognitive-developmental level does mediate the group differences in faith development, then, we argue, these data would suggest that there may be little about transcendence, per se, that is relevant to moral exemplarity. To address this potential confound, we ran an analysis analogous to the omnibus test on faith development described above, but this time removing any covariance accounted for by stage of moral reasoning. This analysis of covariance (with stage of moral reasoning as a covariate), however, revealed that the simple main effect — caring exemplars versus their matched comparison group — remained significant although the size of the effect was somewhat reduced, \( F(1,92) = 5.51, p = .02, \eta^2 = .06 \). Thus, partialing out cognitive-developmental status does not eliminate the relationship between faith development and moral exemplarity.

A final proposition is that religiosity and/or spirituality might mediate the remaining relationship between faith development and moral exemplarity. However, analyses adding religiosity and spirituality as covariates indicated that neither mediated the relationship. The proportion of variance that remains explained by faith development would seem to belong to a part of the realm of transcendent faith that is not tapped by structural-developmental level, religiosity, or spirituality.

**Morality Paves the Way to Transcendence**

This chapter has explored the relevance of religion, spirituality, and transcendent faith to moral functioning, returning to themes well-voiced by William James over a century ago. The findings of a series of studies strongly challenge the hard-line demarcation view that has been dominant in moral psychology for some time which
compartmentalized these domains as independent aspects of human functioning. The evidence is now overwhelmingly abundant that these domains entail important interconnections.

The results of our research do provide a corrective response to Colby and Damon’s (1992) finding regarding the claimed role of religious faith and spirituality in moral action. With a larger sample, the inclusion of appropriate comparison groups, and reliance on objective measures that operationalize religiosity, spirituality, and faith, our study indicated no differences between exemplar and comparison participants on measures of either religiosity or spirituality. Interestingly, our findings regarding the psychological functioning of moral exemplars in this regard clearly accord with Walker and Pitts’s (1998) finding that, in people’s ordinary understandings, mature moral functioning does not necessitate high levels of religiosity or spirituality. Our findings also accord with our second proposition that morality may but does not necessarily implicate concerns about the transcendent.

Our findings did indicate, however, that caring exemplars had a more mature level of faith development than comparison participants, whereas no such difference was found for brave exemplars. This certainly suggests that the role of faith is differentially implicated for different types of moral action. In the larger project (Walker & Frimer, in press) from which the present data are drawn, one notable and consistent finding was that personality differences between moral exemplars and comparison participants were more pronounced for caring than for brave exemplars. This may reflect that fact that caring exemplars were being recognized for long-term volunteer service which may have largely been a reflection of deeply ingrained character traits, whereas brave exemplars were being recognized for a single (albeit momentous) heroic act which may have been to a greater extent impelled by situational factors.

Interestingly, the modal stage of faith development in the present study was not particularly extraordinary given that approximately 96% of faith judgments were coded as Stage 3 or 4. Thus, the meaningful distinction between caring exemplars and other groups can be characterized primarily in terms of the qualitative contrast between these particular stages. Recall that Stage 3 individuals passively infuse the views of close others or authorities; the shift to Stage 4 rests on the process of actively and deliberatively constructing a worldview for oneself. Thus, our caring exemplars were more likely to have engaged the laborious yet critical process of constructing their own faith epistemology. This finding is congruent with moral identity theory that emphasizes the notion of personhood—the self actively constructing an identity under the direction of moral reasoning (Blasi, 1984).

More generally, faith development reflects the process of meaning-making and of one’s epistemic standing toward the transcendent. Reasoning at the higher levels of faith development in particular displays an openness to the complexity of multiple perspectives and dimensions which is simultaneously grounded in a critical self-awareness. It entails an expanded awareness and inclusiveness of groups other than one’s own. It stands prior to the social order, evaluating authority in terms of universalizable principles of relationship. It embraces complexity and ambiguity and recognizes a multidimensional reality that can be seen through different metaphors and methods as a way to deeper understanding. There is an evident working towards a transcending vision of the good. Such mature and well-developed faith provides a foundation for the expanded circle of concern that characterizes committed and caring action toward others.

An important caveat regarding moral exemplar studies such as reported here is that they have uniformly been carried out subsequent to the moral action, raising the possibility that personological and other differences are the result of an identity reconstructive process prompted by the action itself. This opens the question of whether identity functions predominantly in a proactive sense (akin to an operator’s manual) or a reactive one (akin to a documentary) — a matter yet unresolved.

Further, there remains the question of how moral exemplar data inform our discussion on transcendance and morality. Recall that our first proposition posited that transcendance acts to amplify and motivate morally relevant (good, bad) thought, whereas our second proposition held that there are various groundings for mature moral functioning, not only transcendent but also secular. The gist for our discussion is the finding of more mature faith development among caring exemplars than other groups. There are at least three just-so stories that can be told in that regard.

One possibility is that the caring exemplars may have developed their more sophisticated faith development prior to their extraordinary moral action. This scenario is consistent with our first proposition but reticent regarding our second. Such an advanced epistemic stance may have given meaning to, and provided motivation for, the moral acts in the first place, congruent with the notion that identity may serve proactively or like an operator’s manual. Several scholars (Blasi, 1990; Fernhout, 1989; Kunzman, 2003) have argued that, for many people, morality acquires its meaning primarily within the context of religious faith. It would be telling to conduct similar research with samples of immoral exemplars (such as psychopaths or terrorists) to determine the extent to which religiosity and/or faith may also lead people toward negative moral outcomes.

Another just-so story is congruent with our second proposition (that morality may lead to transcendance, albeit not necessarily so) and with the notion that identity may be a reaction to moral action. That is, the internalization of moral values and engagement in moral action may have subsequently lead the caring exemplars to explore their faith and the transcendent more seriously. This shares the spirit of Kohlberg’s Stage 7, wherein the internalization of moral values and principles prompts questions regarding the ultimate purpose of morality and one’s connection to the grand scheme of the universe. While Kohlberg’s placing this connection at the virtually unattainable Stage 7 made such a convergence exceedingly esoteric, we argue here that the convergence of morality with larger questions about the meaning and purpose of one’s existence may be far more mundane. Note that the present data are particularly supportive of our second proposition (that morality does not necessarily lead to concerns regarding the transcendent) in that one type of
moral exemplars (viz., caring) did differ from their comparison group on faith development, whereas the other (viz., brave) did not. This affirms the notion that there are many paths to moral excellence, one of which may be through faith development. This remains a question for future investigation.

And the third just-so story is that the association between faith development and moral exemplarity may be spurious. There may exist a broader construct (e.g., generalized flourishing) that has caused moral functioning and faith development to co-occur. Thus it remains possible that there exists no operative relationship between the two.

In this chapter we have explored two propositions regarding the functional relationship between transcendence and moral functioning and have reviewed relevant data. The findings of our present study represent a corrective to Colby and Damon (1992) and act to clarify their assertion regarding transcendence in lives of moral exemplars. We have presented evidence that, when it comes to moral functioning, the relevant personological dimension is neither religiosity nor spirituality but, rather, faith development. In the unpacking of these data, however, we have revealed more questions than answers. The hunt is on for sources of moral motivation; it is our contention that the search ought to include the realm of that which we cannot readily discern.

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