ANNUAL REVIEWS

Annual Review of Psychology

Moral Improvement of Self, Social Relations, and Society

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Annu. Rev. Psychol. 2024. 75:295–310

First published as a Review in Advance on October 12, 2023

The *Annual Review of Psychology* is online at psych.annualreviews.org

https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-032420-031614

Keywords

moral, motivation, self-improvement, social, relations, society

Abstract

There is always room for moral improvement. However, very few prior reviews have focused on the phenomenon of moral improvement of self, social relations, or society. We first consider prevailing notions of the self-concept by highlighting the niche of theory and research that identifies an improving self as a possible identity and basis of motivation to act better and to be better. Second, we discuss moral improvement in the context of social relations, especially the close interpersonal relations that should most facilitate moral improvement. Third, we examine the moral improvement of society, focusing on the factors that facilitate or inhibit caring about potential immorality despite the fact that issues such as inequality, discrimination, and the climate crisis seem to be morally distant and impersonal. Finally, we discuss future directions for theory, research, and application.

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INTRODUCTION

There is always room for moral improvement. We all could be more honest, more fair, and more equitable—the typical content of moral principles (Ellemers et al. 2019, Leach et al. 2015). Given this inevitable gap between actual and ideal morality, this review considers the factors that enable people to focus on, and be motivated by, improvement of themselves, their social relations, and their societies. In other words, what leads people to want to be more moral in the future even if this raises the potentially uncomfortable prospect that they are less moral than they could be—or should be—in the present (Leach et al. 2015, Sedikides & Hepper 2009)?

Very few prior reviews in the *Annual Review of Psychology*, or elsewhere, have focused on the phenomenon of moral improvement of self, social relations, or society. In psychological work on morality, interest has gravitated toward the ways in which a desire for consistency (e.g., Elder et al. 2022; for a review, see Sedikides & Strube 1997) motivates people to reason and act morally to maintain their sense of themselves, their social relations, and their society as moral (for a review, see Boegershausen et al. 2015). Thus, people are presumed to be motivated to maintain present morality rather than to improve future morality (Sun & Goodwin 2020). It is important to note that the motivation for moral consistency in no way implies a motivation for moral improvement. In fact, believing that one is moral in the present can even "license" morally questionable action in the future as one sees oneself as beyond reproach (Mullen & Monin 2016, Sedikides & Strube 1997). Such a belief can also lead one to "turn off" one's moral standards so that potentially immoral action does not appear inconsistent with one's moral standards (Eisenberg 2000). This has been called moral disengagement, and it is thought to be rooted in a pervasive motivation for moral self-consistency (Bandura 1999).

Psychology has also studied the potentially disturbing discrepancy of being less moral than we believe ourselves to be (Higgins 1987). For instance, there is a great deal of work on emotions elicited by moral failure, such as guilt and shame (for reviews, see Eisenberg 2000, Tangney et al. 2007). Even when accompanied by such strong emotions, moral discrepancies rarely seem to lead to a desire for improvement (for a review, see Gausel & Leach 2011). Not wanting to see oneself as immoral, or even as too distant from one's moral ideal, is often considered to be driven by the motive of self-enhancement (Sedikides & Hepper 2009, Sedikides & Strube 1997). Ultimately, our desire to think well of ourselves appears to prevent us from accepting evidence that we have fallen short of our moral standards and may even need to improve morally.

Because self-consistency and self-enhancement are such important motives in our moral lives, they can overpower the desire for self-improvement (Sun & Goodwin 2020). Indeed, the discrepancy between one's present and future (improved) morality that would be created by self-improvement poses a direct challenge to our cherished motives for moral self-consistency and self-enhancement (Sedikides & Hepper 2009). Perhaps because it is rarer, and more difficult to realize (e.g., Sun & Goodwin 2020), the desire for moral improvement has garnered insufficient attention before now. Thus, we start this review by discussing prevailing notions of the moral self-concept, which tend to focus on personal psychological investment in a moral self and the motivation to maintain it by acting consistently with personal moral standards. We extend this approach by highlighting the niche of theory and research that identifies an improving self as a possible identity and basis of motivation to act better and to be better. Where there is less work on moral improvement, we consider theory and research mainly focused on the improvement of competence. We consider the self as an individual and as a member of a group or other collective. We then move on to discuss moral improvement in the context of social relations, especially close interpersonal relations. We focus on the ways in which important social relations hamper or enable efforts at moral improvement. Finally, we examine the moral improvement of society. Here, we focus on the factors that facilitate or inhibit people's concerns about potential immorality in society, where pervasive issues such as inequality, discrimination, and the climate crisis can seem more distant and impersonal than immorality of the self in close social relations. In the concluding sections, we summarize our argument and discuss potentially fruitful future directions for theory, research, and application regarding the moral improvement of self, social relations, and society.

MORAL IMPROVEMENT

As Bloom (2010) noted, psychological theory and research on morality have focused on stability rather than change. However, change is necessary to improvement. In fact, the common assumption that what is widely thought, felt, and done is what is moral (Lindström et al. 2018) lends itself to viewing morality as relatively stable as masses move slowly. A prevailing emphasis on generic, presumably universal, and deep-seated processes of moral cognition, affect, judgement, and behavior also lends itself to thinking of morality as something well entrenched in self and society and thus difficult to change (Bloom 2010, Brambilla & Leach 2014; cf. Tomasello & Vaish 2013). Even the extensive work on moral development over the life course tends to view improvement as an early childhood effort to reach an adequate level of moral skill (for a review, see Killen & Smetana 2013). This may be a vestige of Kohlberg's and others' stage models of moral development, which viewed morality as the acquisition of the age-appropriate cognitive tools necessary to moral reasoning and action (for a review, see Lapsley & Carlo 2014). Common concepts like moral identity, character, and values all imply that morality is a stable quality of the person that once developed does not (continue to) improve (for reviews, see Killen & Smetana 2013, Lapsley & Carlo 2014). The growing evidence that infants and toddlers show moral concern at the earliest stages of development (for reviews, see Tomasello & Vaish 2013, Woo et al. 2022) only seems to reinforce the view that morality does not improve in us as much as it emerges out of us (see also Bloom 2010). Of course, we must acknowledge the serious power of moral inertia as the antithesis to the change inherent to moral improvement. Like all habits (Verplanken & Orbell 2022, Wood & Rünger 2016), moral habits are hard to break. Relatedly, research shows that the status quo is seen as morally good simply because it exists (Eidelman & Crandall 2014) and that the longer the status quo exists, the better it is seen to be. For instance, US military use of torture techniques in the Middle East was judged to be more justified by a US national sample when it was presented as being in use for 40 years rather than as a new practice (Eidelman & Crandall 2014).

To consider moral improvement, one must imagine some greater future level of morality and be aware that one's present morality is not (yet) at that level (Oettingen 2012). If one interprets this gap between present and future morality too negatively (e.g., as an unbridgeable chasm or as a character defect), this can produce a dejected and dispiriting self-criticism that turns one against the possibility of improvement (Higgins 1987, Sedikides & Hepper 2009). It is important to acknowledge, however, that self-criticism itself is not inherently dysphoric or dispiriting. Indeed, self-criticism can highlight a need for self-improvement that is experienced more neutrally or even experienced as a pleasant sense of purpose, gratitude, or growth (see Heine et al. 1999).

Wanting to improve is a more positive interpretation of the gap between where one is and where one wishes to be (Sedikides & Hepper 2009). As such, considering improvement in the future can be motivating. Oettingen's (2012, p. 55) influential model of fantasy realization specifies the ways in which thinking about a future that improves on the present is more motivating than simply wishing for a better future:

> Despite what the self-help and coaching industry wants us to believe, for desired behavior change to occur thinking about the future should involve both the desired future and the resisting reality. Only then can future and reality be mentally connected in the sense that the reality contains obstacles that can and will be mastered on the way to fantasy realization.

Mentally contrasting present and future better enables people to develop a concrete positive expectation of the future and a sense of self-efficacy about how it can be attained (see also Bandura 2001). In contrast, abstract positive thinking about an idealized future, with little focus on the actual present, can work to undermine motivation to improve, as it creates the impression that the future is already attained. Oettingen (2012) explains that indulging in abstract thinking about a better future is only useful in an effort to maintain a sense of optimism in the face of poor expectations and/or self-efficacy in the present. It is, in essence, a way to use a possible future to keep hope alive until the chance of improvement grows.

In general, feedback that demonstrates improvement and/or provides a means for further improvement is linked to future improvement. This is especially true when people are well positioned, psychologically and socially, to take advantage of feedback. Indeed, this is when feedback is most encouraging (for a review, see Sedikides & Hepper 2009). This is likely why people tend to prefer to receive constructive feedback that points the way to improvement, even if the feedback is critical (Abi-Esber et al. 2022); and yet, the provision of critical feedback appears to be quite rare. Abi-Esber et al. (2022) showed that this results from the potential providers of critical feedback underestimating others' desire for such feedback. Instead of providing feedback that can inform improvement, many potential critics focus on the potential costs to themselves or to their relationship if the recipient takes the feedback badly (Abi-Esber et al. 2022).

There are, however, circumstances in which critical feedback is more openly and freely available. Stevenson & Lee's (1989) video *The Polished Stones* gives many concrete examples of Chinese and Japanese math classrooms where mistakes are discussed openly as a means to improvement (see **Figure 1**). There is little praise of success and little castigation of mistakes. What is good for math improvement may be good for moral improvement, as people tend to see both domains as fixed rather than improvable. Indeed, those who believe that morality is something malleable (so-called incremental theorists, or those with a growth mindset) judge moral wrongdoing less harshly and are more focused on their moral reform compared to those who have a fixed mindset on morality (for a review, see Molden & Dweck 2006). Furthermore, those who have a growth mindset believe that morality is something that can and should be improved with effort. Believing that the self is improvable is a basis for continual effort at improvement even in the face of difficulty or failure (for a review, see Molden & Dweck 2006). For these reasons, Chiu et al. (1997)

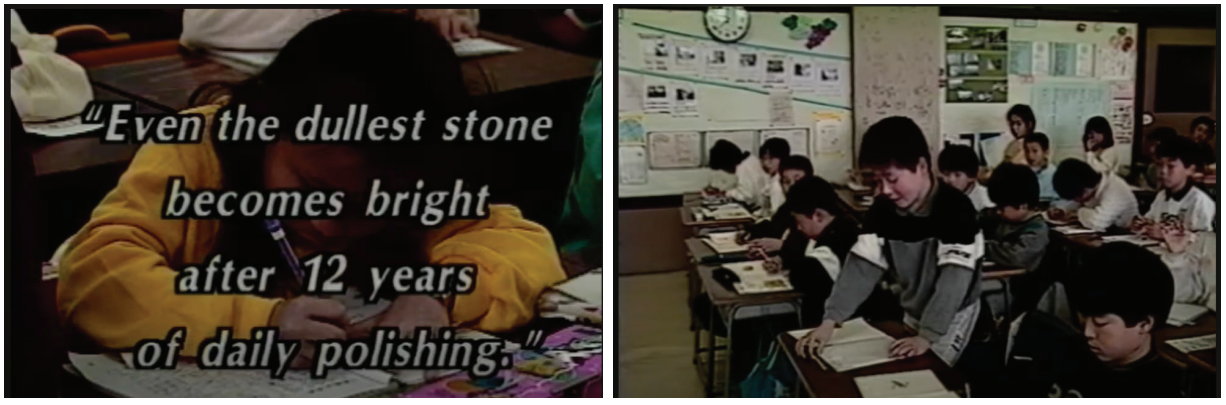

Figure 1

Scenes from Stevenson & Lee's (1989) *The Polished Stones*, which showcases classrooms in which mistakes are discussed openly as a means to improve. The video is available at **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tpr6Q2FsJyE**.

argued that those who believe that morality is improvable are more oriented to societal change that improves the rights and freedoms of people in ways that contribute to the growth of society as a whole.

Self: Individual and Group

Due to the focus on the motives of self-consistency and self-enhancement in contemporary psychology, there has been much less attention to the motive of self-improvement, despite its obvious relevance to self, social relations, and society (Sedikides & Hepper 2009). One obvious reason for this is the widespread assumption in (Western) psychology that a pervasive desire for self-enhancement, and thus a highly positive view of self, makes it more difficult for people to acknowledge areas in need of improvement (see Heine et al. 1999, Sedikides & Hepper 2009). This presumption is applied to the less studied moral improvement as much as it is to the more studied competence improvement (e.g., math, academic, work performance). It is clear, however, that a narrow focus on self-esteem at the expense of self-improvement is not ubiquitous across cultures, contexts, or individuals (e.g., Kurman et al. 2012, Stevenson & Lee 1989). For instance, Heine et al. (1999) reviewed work in anthropology, sociology, and psychology to show that Japanese individuals tend to take a much more self-critical view of the self than is presumed prevalent and preferred in Western psychology. Instead of being a detriment to the self-concept and to performance, a self-critical stance actually appears to enable more frequent and honest assessments of the self in a way that better enables plans and efforts toward self-improvement.

It is also worth noting that the individual self-enhancement orientation central to Western psychology has, at times, allowed an emphasis on moral (and other kinds of) improvement. Indeed, numerous strands of classic modern personality theory in the first half of the twentieth century presumed an innate or otherwise widely shared desire to improve the self and society (Hall & Lindzey 1957). Prominent examples include concepts such as Adler's superiority striving, White's effectance motivation, and Maslow's self-actualization (see Hall & Lindzey 1957). In the social psychology of that period, we find parallel examples in Lewin's (1951) influential field theory and the offshoot of Festinger's (1942) notion of level of aspiration. It seems likely that the societal optimism of the modern period, rooted in unprecedented technological advances (e.g., space flight, computing, telecommunications, fast travel), led scholars to expect that the improvements

in human material circumstances would engender improvements in human moral, intellectual, and other capacities.

Viewing moral and other improvement as central to the healthy development of the self in society was also part and parcel of many approaches to personality and psychological health and well-being in mid- to late-twentieth-century thinking. In contrast to the more social psychological view of the enhanced self as the healthy self, this perspective thought of honest, critical self-assessment as integral to genuine health (for discussions, see Colvin & Block 1994, Shedler et al. 1993). In fact, an overly positive view of the self, with little to no room for improvement, is considered a sign of narcissistic defensiveness and thus of poor psychological health and well-being (Robins & John 1997). Narcissism does indeed make people closed to (moral or other) criticism and thus forecloses opportunities to learn about ways in which one can improve. This appears to operate in parallel ways whether the narcissistic self being defended is an individual or a group; narcissism closes avenues of growth for the personality as well as for the organization, group, or society.

More recently, Kurman et al. (2012) argued that self-improvement is a strategy to respond to failure that is a middle ground between attempting to control the circumstances and trying to adjust to them by controlling one's evaluation of the circumstances. University students in Israel and Hong Kong were presented with various examples of failing in achievement domains (such as work or school performance) and were asked what they would do. Participants' responses were categorized by independent judges. Self-improvement was reported in both cultural samples, although it was the most prevalent strategy in Hong Kong and the least prevalent in Israel.

Oyserman et al. (2004) conceptualized "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius 1986) as "roadmaps" to improvement. By identifying the specific ways in which one can (and will) improve, individuals can mitigate against the potential ill effects of failure and self-criticism until the improvement is achieved. In other words, the roadmap of a possible (future) self connects the present—actual, less than ideal—self to the future, ideal self. In this way, not being as moral as I would like to be now is made less difficult to bear by connecting it to the planned possible self in the future where I am as moral as I would like to be. Hoyle & Sherrill (2006) argue that "hoped for" possible selves facilitate improvement specifically by enabling self-regulation in service of the specific goals for improvement and the anticipation of positive evaluation from others for reaching one's goals.

Morality is a central aspect of identifying with, and feeling good about, the groups to which individuals belong (Leach et al. 2007). Although this investment in being moral as a group can promote self-enhancement or defensiveness, it can also on occasion promote criticism of the group with an eye toward moral improvement (for a review, see Leach et al. 2015). A recent quantitative synthesis of experiments by H.J. Smith & D. Grant (unpublished manuscript) showed that openness to information critical of an in-group is increased by an affirmation of the individual's or the in-group's values. Self-affirmation theory suggests that such boosts to the integrity of the self reduce defensiveness regarding moral and other failures (for a discussion, see Badea & Sherman 2019). Presumably, an affirmation of (individual or group) values secures the self-concept sufficiently enough to allow individuals to consider and even internalize self-critical information regarding the in-group's moral failure (e.g., Čehajić-Clancy & Olsson 2023, Wenzel et al. 2020). This less defensive self-criticism is then thought to enable a consideration of ways to improve the moral flaw or failure.

Another explanation for when (individual or group) moral failure leads to self-defense and when it leads to self-improvement was offered by Gausel & Leach (2011). They argued that the particular pattern of cognitive appraisal of, and emotional feelings about, moral failure explains the motivational path taken (see **Figure 2**). Thus, when moral failure is appraised in a way that produces a feeling of rejection (due to other's condemnation) or inferiority (due to a global

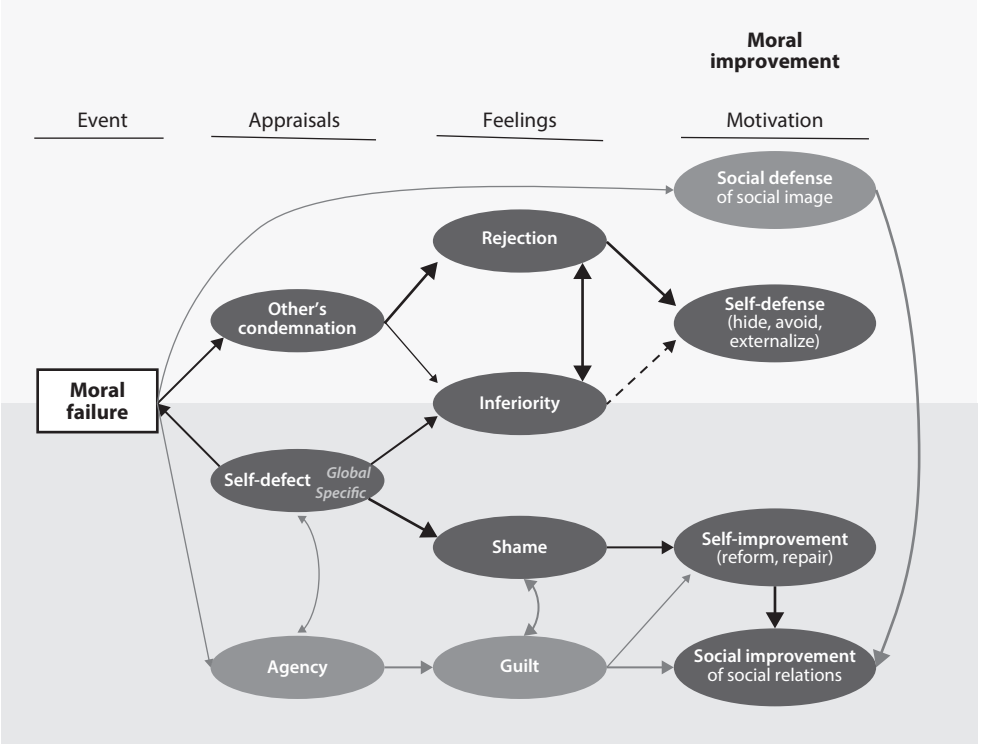

Figure 2

Gausel & Leach's (2011) expanded conceptual model of the experience of moral failure. The light-shaded top of the figure shows concern for social image, and the dark-shaded bottom half of the figure shows concern for self-image. The core model is shown in dark gray ellipses and thick black arrows, and the expanded components of the model are shown in medium grey ellipses and light grey arrows. The dashed arrow represents a link that is theorized to be tenuous.

self-defect), people have little choice but to be motivated to defend their self-concept. Defense can be achieved by hiding from others, avoiding the moral failure, or even lashing out to externalize the emotional pain. In contrast, when moral failure is appraised as a specific self-defect that produces feelings of shame or guilt, people tend to be motivated to improve their defect and the social relations hurt by it. The appraisal of a specific—rather than global—self-defect implies that the defect can be altered, which is essential to the motivation to improve (as discussed above). This key tenet was confirmed in a quantitative synthesis of 23 studies investigating moral failures that appeared to be reparable (Leach & Cidam 2015). The results showed that shame was moderately and positively linked with motivation or actual effort at self-improvement. This pattern of results was consistent regardless of whether the agent of moral failure was the individual or group self.

Social Relations

Moral improvement is, like all things, embedded in social relations. This is true even for individual moral improvement, as it does not occur in a social vacuum: Individuals have relationships (of varying degrees of physical proximity and emotional closeness) with others who might notice or react to their improvement in the moral domain. Indeed, moral thought, feeling, and action are necessarily thought, feeling, and action about other people and our relationships with them.

Morality is always about relationships and our orientation toward individual others and the world we share with them (Leach et al. 2015, Rai & Fiske 2011). This is why we often want to see moral improvement in others, too, especially in ways that make our relationships with them better (Rai & Fiske 2011).

Individuals are more satisfied with relationship partners, and more committed to the relationships, to the degree that partners are viewed as working to improve themselves morally and otherwise (Hui et al. 2012). However, the benefits of a partner's efforts at self-improvement appear to be dependent on assuming that great effort can actually lead to serious improvement. More specifically, Hui et al. (2012, study 3) examined this issue by following 44 Hong Kong couples over three months. Individuals saw greater growth in their partners, felt more secure in the relationship, and considered their relationship of better quality to the degree that they viewed their partners as being able to improve interpersonally and making great effort to do so. Those who viewed their partner's interpersonal skills as fixed reacted less positively to their partner's effort to improve as a partner.

In a series of studies, Joo et al. (2022) found that, compared to partners in European American couples, partners in Hong Kong Chinese couples see themselves as changing more for their partner and believe more strongly that this is a good thing. This is tied to better relationship quality. Moreover, it is often seen as a sort of ethical duty to maintain harmony in the relationship. European Americans' change in one's self is more beneficial when seen as an independent and free choice by the individual who makes a sacrifice for the benefit of their partner or the relationship. Thus, believing that a person changes to benefit their partner is beneficial, especially when it is viewed in terms consistent with the prevailing cultural model of the self in relationships.

Individuals do not just attend to and react to the moral improvement of close others. They can also influence others' improvement by supporting it. In their review of the effects of social support in relationships, Feeney & Collins (2014) identify the underexamined ways in which relationship partners can support their loved ones in taking opportunities for self-development and personal growth. In this way, partners serve as a relational catalyst that better enables one to thrive rather than simply survive or cope with adversity. Feeney & Collins identify four concrete ways in which partners can support their loved one's growth: (*a*) showing enthusiasm and validating goals so as to nurture reaching for opportunities to grow, (*b*) helping the loved one to recognize genuine opportunities for growth and to view them as possible, (*c*) encouraging the development of plans for how to reach specific goals, and (*d*) facilitating the implementation of these goals for growth. Thus, supportive partners can assist in all the key stages of behavior change, providing the individual with both emotional and instrumental social support to improve.

The Michelangelo phenomenon. Close others, such as relationship partners, can facilitate growth toward one's ideal self when they affirm and reflect back such moral or other goals. This has been called the Michelangelo phenomenon (Rusbult et al. 2009). Like the sculptor Michelangelo, we each can recognize and shape the masterpiece figure embedded in the marble of others. We can recognize the potential ideal self our partner wishes to be and is striving toward, and we can directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously, act toward them in ways that encourage our partners to put their ideal selves into practice in their everyday behavior (Overall et al. 2010, Rusbult et al. 2009). In these two ways, a close other who facilitates moral growth can increase the rate and degree of moral self-improvement (Overall et al. 2010, Rusbult et al. 2009). Interestingly, this facilitation of the ideal self can be reciprocal in a pair, as each partner encourages the other's improvement (Rusbult et al. 2009). Dyadic improvement—that is, growing together—benefits not only each partner individually but also the partnership. For instance, Rusbult et al. (2009) found that romantic couples who facilitated each other's ideal selves

had better quality interactions and felt more satisfied with these interactions. As in numerous examples above, however, criticism and questioning of the other's ideal/actual gap appear to undermine self-improvement goals and action (Overall et al. 2010).

Managing conflict. As discussed above, people tend to avoid giving critical feedback to others partly because they worry about harming their relationship. As a result, many people underestimate the value of critical feedback to others (Abi-Esber et al. 2022). However, in close relationships, "direct opposition is beneficial when serious problems need to be addressed and partners are able to change" (Overall & McNulty 2017, p. 1). This direct and constructive approach to conflict in social relations has the potential to be the most productive and to allow the involved parties to generate concrete, actionable goals for their mutual improvement and/or the improvement of the relationship between them. Pleasant, affectionate, nonoppositional communication does little to address serious problems. However, such nonconfrontational affirmation of the other may be the best one can do if the other is in a poor position to improve or believes that improvement is not possible or preferred. In fact, Kammrath & Dweck (2006) found that incremental theorists (i.e., people who believe that personalities can change and improve) were more likely than entity theorists (i.e., people who believe that personality is fixed) to confront and try to rectify their partner's transgressive behavior in a constructive manner (see also Rattan et al. 2023). Because incremental theorists believe that self-improvement is possible, they are able to confront their partners in a way that presumes that the partners can be better. It is much easier to confront others constructively when one assumes that they will be responsive to one's complaint and want to improve.

Society

People may also believe that moral improvement of their society—with laws and institutions governed in line with moral principles of honesty, fairness, and equality—is preferable and possible in a better future (for a general discussion, see de Saint-Laurent et al. 2018). Societal improvement is not, however, the goal of all protests, which can sometimes focus on other goals, such as autonomy or system disruption or destruction (see Sweetman et al. 2013). Nonetheless, many social movements are predicated on an imagined future of moral improvement that the collective action of strikes, protest, campaigning, or voting is meant to help bring about (Hawlina et al. 2020). In turn, many social movements aim to broaden and build their appeal by offering potential supporters a vision of an improved future that is made more possible by their involvement (Hawlina et al. 2020). For instance, labor unions try to recruit members and gain support for strikes by outlining how such collective action can improve wages and working conditions. Similarly, environmental movements argue that their collective action can improve the quality of food, water, and air in ways that make the planet healthier and thus human living better.

Bain et al. (2013) argue and show that individuals' interest in acting on social and political issues in the present is influenced by their beliefs about our "collective futures." Whether regarding climate action, abortion, drug laws, or religious influence, individuals are more motivated to act when they believe their involvement would encourage the moral improvement of fellow members of society. This suggests that individuals presume that our chances of morally improving society depend on our ability to first morally improve the members of society, who together determine what is collectively possible. In other words, moral improvements must occur among at least some individuals before such improvements can be implemented on a larger scale across society. This presumption makes some sense given the interdependent nature of many social issues. Achieving carbon neutrality, for example, requires individuals, corporations, and governments across the world to cooperate in a fair and effective system of regulation and innovation. Without the moral improvement of the key actors, there is little basis to trust that most or all will cooperate fully and

not take advantage for their personal benefit. The moral improvement of society can be built on the moral improvement of the selves and the social relations that exist within the society. Relatedly, in their analysis of moral motivations for climate change action, Bain & Bongiorno (2020) emphasize the motivational power of individuals seeing themselves as part of an ethical collective effort at improving the health of the planet. Working together collectively for good is akin to the Michelangelo phenomenon at the level of society. It is a way to recognize and affirm another's moral effort while having one's own moral effort reciprocally supported. Extrapolated to large-scale collectives, there is no telling what mutual support for the moral improvement of society might do to bolster motivation and action toward improvement. Like the classrooms and schools in Stevenson & Lee's (1989) *The Polished Stones*, members of society can cocreate institutional, cultural, and interpersonal systems that facilitate continual effort, assessment, and acknowledgment of moral improvement in a virtuous circle.

A persistent feature of human societies across time and place is unequal treatment, unequal outcomes, and unequal opportunities for individuals and groups. Inequality across visible social groups (e.g., according to class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or world region) perhaps makes it most obvious that it is societal systems of institutional policies and practices (Amis et al. 2020), political representation (Pascale 2012), and cultural production (Münch & Smelser 1993) that produce and reproduce inequality (Keister & Southgate 2022). This is why many efforts at the moral improvement of societies focus on the improvement of formal systems such as antidiscrimination laws (Barron & Hebl 2010) and/or informal systems such as cultural ideals of tolerance and social norms of inclusion (Crandall et al. 2002).

Moral terms—such as injustice, unfairness, and illegitimacy—can be applied to inequality that is viewed as too substantial to reflect legitimate differences in achievement or deservingness. In other words, inequality that is large in magnitude or widespread in scope can be seen as inherently immoral because it is presumed that differences so great can only be achieved through immoral means (i.e., systems of exploitation, discrimination, devaluation, and dehumanization). Alternatively, inequality can be viewed as immoral because it is thought to be proved that inequality is produced by explicitly immoral means. Whatever the basis for viewing societal inequality as immoral, this view is a necessary building block for the motivation to improve the morality of societal systems. Thus, viewing inequality as the good and right way for societal systems to operate (e.g., as the natural order of things, as God's will, or as the result of legitimate competition) precludes a moral critique of inequality and the attendant motivation for the moral improvement of society.

Interpreting Societal Systems as Immoral

When people encounter evidence of inequality in a society, they need to interpret this evidence to determine how to respond (Iyer & Leach 2010, Knowles et al. 2014). A first question to consider is whether this is a moral problem: Does the inequality violate a moral principle? If a group's negative outcome or treatment is believed to be undeserved, this violates the principle of fairness. If another group's positive outcome or treatment is believed to be unearned, the principle of meritocracy is called into question. In both of these cases, the group's outcome or treatment cannot be attributed to its actions, character, or luck, and thus it presents a moral problem for the society.

A second question to consider is whether one is implicated in some way in the moral problem (Iyer & Leach 2010). For instance, is one a member of a group that is disadvantaged or discriminated against? Alternatively, is one a member of a group with clear unearned privilege or responsibility for discrimination against another group? Or does one personally endorse moral principles, such as modesty or equity, that are violated by the way that one's society operates? If

the inequality is believed to be a moral problem that implicates one in some way, this lays the foundation for individuals to take action to address the inequality. In the next section, we consider the moral motivations that may underpin or impede efforts to improve societal systems.

Moral Motivations to Improve Society

If people value a particular moral principle that is violated, they interpret this violation as an injustice and can experience strong, unpleasant emotions such as anger. These responses typically motivate a person to defend their moral values from attack. In the context of inequality, then, believed moral violations should predict efforts to improve the societal system, whether via support for social equality strategies or via willingness to take collective action to help create this change (Agostini & van Zomeren 2021, Radke et al. 2020, van de Vyver & Abrams 2015).

Across frameworks that explain protest for the improvement of societal inequality among members of high-status (e.g., Radke et al. 2020) and low-status (e.g., van Zomeren & Spears 2009) groups, moral concern is noted as a key explanation. Agostini & van Zomeren (2021) recently assessed this idea in a meta-analysis of studies conducted by a variety of researchers across a variety of contexts. They found that moral concern is moderately and positively associated with protest for the improvement of society, independent of other established predictors such as (politicized) identity, believed injustice, and efficacy to bring about improvement. In addition, moral concern also predicts protest of inequality through its connection to the other established predictors of identity, injustice, and efficacy. Furthermore, moral concern works similarly for members of high-status and low-status groups. Thus, viewing the inequality between groups in society as a moral problem is both a direct and indirect (i.e., through identity, injustice, and efficacy) explanation of individuals' readiness to protest to improve that inequality, regardless of their group's position within the status hierarchy.

Threat to Ingroup Morality Undermines Moral Improvement

Receiving information about a moral violation does not always lead to improvement action. Rather, moral violations can serve to undercut a group's image as moral and good, which can lead group members to experience a threat to their in-group's morality (Nadler & Shnabel 2015). In the context of societal inequality, members of a high-status group can experience in-group morality threat for one of two reasons (Iyer 2022). First, their group may be responsible for perpetuating discrimination against a lower-status group, thus causing direct harm to others (Branscombe et al. 1999). Second, their group may benefit from privileges that it has not earned, thus undermining principles of meritocracy (Knowles et al. 2014).

In both cases, the resulting in-group morality threat is uncomfortable: People do not like to think that their group is immoral (Leach et al. 2007). Threats to a group's morality may thus elicit a defensive response that is narrowly focused on protecting the threatened identity rather than on creating societal improvement (Iyer & Leach 2010). For instance, framing the limitations of the Netherlands' immigration policy in moral terms (versus nonmoral terms) resulted in Dutch citizens reporting more perceived threat, more anger directed at the immigrant groups that were harmed by the policy, and less support for efforts to improve the immigration policies (Täuber & van Zomeren 2013). In another set of studies, American (Trinkner et al. 2019) and Australian (McCarthy et al. 2021) police officers' awareness of the negative "racist cop" stereotype was associated with reduced perceptions of self-legitimacy and increased support for coercive policing that perpetuates inequality. Even acknowledgment of in-group responsibility for racial inequality is associated with limited efforts at restitution rather than support for broader policies for societal improvement (Greenwood 2015, Iyer & Leach 2010).

The Moral Status Quo in Societal Systems

Due to its historical and geographic prevalence, inequality appears to be a central feature of societal systems. Inequality can thus be perceived to be part of the status quo or just the way things are, which sets the stage for its acceptance: Theory and research in social psychology have established a consistent preference for seeing the status quo as good and moral (Eidelman & Crandall 2014). Thus, the underpayment of women in many professions (i.e., the pay gap) or their concentration in lower-status occupations in a domain (e.g., nurses versus doctors) is viewed as a persistent reality that must exist for good reason.

One set of explanations for this phenomenon focuses on cognitive processes, whereby people presume that the way things are equates to the way things ought to be. This view is based on two related biases: first, that the mere existence of a social system makes it good and right (existence bias); second, that long-standing systems are right and good (longevity bias).

Accounts of motivated cognition offer another set of explanations for the positive views of existing societal systems. These frameworks focus on goal-oriented means of rationalizing the status quo. For instance, just world theory posits that people want to believe in a just world where individuals get the outcomes they deserve (Lerner 1980). Similarly, system justification theory proposes that people have social and psychological needs to see the status quo as legitimate and good (Jost et al. 2004), even when they belong to a lower-status group that is disadvantaged by the status hierarchy. The tendency to view the status quo as moral and good suggests that societal inequality can go unnoticed and unchallenged. Indeed, research indicates that people often do not pay sufficient attention to their societal systems to notice even extreme inequality, or they do not interpret inequality as immoral and thus as needing improvement (Knowles et al. 2014, Leach et al. 2002).

CONCLUSION

At some level, we may never be done improving morally. Even if rare, motivation and movement toward moral improvement are aspects of the human potential that are important to understand and perhaps to encourage. Whether we focus on moral improvement of the self, of social relations, or of society, it seems clear that maintaining effort at moral improvement is difficult at best. Not wanting to see oneself as immoral, or even as too distant from one's moral ideal, make self-enhancement a potent motivational counterweight to self-improvement (Sedikides & Hepper 2009, Sedikides & Strube 1997). The desire for self-enhancement can be so powerful that it can even perversely corrupt one's view of self-improvement. In a series of studies, Stanley and colleagues had individuals face their past moral transgressions (for a review, see Stanley & De Brigard 2019). To convince themselves, and perhaps others, of their moral self-improvement, individuals appeared to exaggerate their past transgressions so as to render their recent transgressions less severe. By viewing themselves as much worse in the past, individuals could self-enhance their present selves by framing themselves as undergoing dramatic moral self-improvement. This is one reason that research must carefully try to distinguish motivation and action genuinely focused on moral self-improvement from those aimed at representing the self within a self-serving narrative of an impressive moral arc. Comparing one's actual moral behavior in more and less socially accountable contexts to one's stated moral goals and behaviors is an important empirical approach. Paradigms that (constructively) encourage people to face discrepancies and plan self-improvement are another potentially fruitful approach.

As we have seen over and over again, across many different types of research, the delicate dynamics of moral improvement appear quite sensitive to the quality and extent of the gap between moral ideal and actuality. Too great a gap, or too threatening a gap, makes it difficult for people to focus on moral improvement. Instead, negative gaps tend to lead to a defense of the self's moral

integrity and/or an avoidance of the moral dimension altogether. This is likely the reason that the belief that moral improvement is possible, and perhaps probable, appears to be so central to sustaining effort at moral improvement. Of course, the probability of success is a key determinant of all motivation to make serious effort, but because moral failure and success are such important outcomes for the self, social relations, and society, the psychological stakes seem higher. This can make moral improvement one of the most delicate forms of improvement, highly sensitive to the circumstances that hinder or help effort at it. As illustrated in Stevenson & Lee's (1989) video *The Polished Stones*, social systems—like classrooms and schools—can be designed to facilitate continual moral improvement in a virtuous circle of honest assessment, support, and effort. Such systems of improvement are an important area for future research, as we have a lot to learn about how they can be best created and sustained to promote continual moral improvement.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We have reviewed motivation for moral improvement at the level of the self, social relations, and society at large. Although we focused on each level of analysis individually, we also tried to make it clear that they are interconnected, sometimes in complex ways. The self-concept exists within social relations and society in ways that alter deeply the operation of the self-concept. In addition, couples, families, and countries are influenced—sometimes profoundly—by individuals. Future work can do more to integrate all the levels of analysis relevant to moral improvement. One promising direction for moral improvement in social relations is Fitzsimons et al.'s (2015) theory of transactive goal dynamics. This framework suggests that a pair of people in a close, interdependent relationship are best understood as pursuing their goals in one social system. Thus, each individual's goal, pursuit of that goal, and eventual outcome can be affected by the goal, pursuit, and outcome of their relationship partner.

The conceptualization and empirical study of moral improvement in self, social relations, and society can benefit from a fuller systems approach that views the social relational system of a dyad or small group as one system within a system of systems (for a discussion, see Leach & Bou Zeineddine 2021). At the lowest level, the self-system of individual cognition, affect, motivation, and action regarding moral improvement is nested within the social relational level of interpersonal relationships, which is nested within the higher levels of groups and societies at large. Although nested hierarchically, the self, social relations, and societal systems influence one another in top-down and bottom-up directions over time. This makes the overarching system dynamical. Thus, society can shape moral improvement within social relations and the self. However, society can also be shaped by the self and social relations. For instance, societal prohibitions of conscientious objection to unnecessary war can hinder such individual protest. Conversely, the individual protest of conscientious objection can influence societal decision makers to avoid unnecessary war.

A systems perspective may also aid formal analysis of which aspects of the system most consistently and most powerfully support the honest assessment of moral gaps and a sustained and productive effort at moral improvement. A systems perspective is especially well positioned to examine the ways in which virtuous circles of the kind discussed above—and other processes of positive feedback loops—create especially effective dynamics for moral improvement by combining synergistically multiple facilitators of effort and action.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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