Moral character: What it is and what it does

Taya R. Cohen & Lily Morse

Carnegie Mellon University, Tepper School of Business

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Author Note

Taya R. Cohen, Carnegie Mellon University, Tepper School of Business, 5000 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15213. Phone: (412) 268-6677. Email: tcohen@cmu.edu.

Lily Morse, Carnegie Mellon University, Tepper School of Business, 5000 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15213. Email: lmorse@andrew.cmu.edu.

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Abstract

Moral character can be conceptualized as an individual's disposition to think, feel, and behave in an ethical versus unethical manner, or as the subset of individual differences relevant to morality. This essay provides an organizing framework for understanding moral character and its relationship to ethical and unethical work behaviors. We present a tripartite model for understanding moral character, with the idea that there are motivational, ability, and identity elements. The motivational element is *consideration of others*—referring to a disposition toward considering the needs and interests of others, and how one's own actions affect other people. The ability element is *self-regulation*—referring to a disposition toward regulating one's behavior effectively, specifically with reference to behaviors that have positive short-term consequences but negative long-term consequences for oneself or others. The identity element is *moral identity*—referring to a disposition toward valuing morality and wanting to view oneself as a moral person. After unpacking what moral character is, we turn our attention to what moral character does, with a focus on how it influences unethical behavior, situation selection, and situation creation. Our research indicates that the impact of moral character on work outcomes is significant and consequential, with important implications for research and practice in organizational behavior.

Keywords: character; morality; ethics; unethical behavior; personality; counterproductive work behavior (CWB); organizational citizenship behavior (OCB);

Contents

1. Introduction

Imagine the worst possible employee. What personality traits does this person have? Putting intelligence and cognitive abilities aside, you could describe the employee as irresponsible, lazy, deceitful, and self-centered. In other words, a perfect mix of low Conscientiousness and low Honesty-Humility—a combination of traits that psychologists Kibeom Lee and Michael Ashton refer to as "an employer's worst nightmare" (Lee & Ashton, 2012, p. 58). This nightmare employee would also have low levels of guilt proneness, meaning that he or she would anticipate little to no negative feelings about acting in selfish and harmful ways (Cohen, Panter, & Turan, 2012, 2013). As a result of having a silent conscience, this person would frequently engage in counterproductive behaviors that harm the organization and the people within it. Finally, in addition to a lack of consideration of others and poor self-regulation abilities, the worst possible employee would be low in moral identity, meaning that being a good person would be irrelevant to—or even in contrast to—his or her self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Simply put, the worst possible employee has low levels of moral character, in addition to any other negative qualities he or she might have regarding skills and abilities.

The goal of this essay is to provide an organizing framework for understanding moral character and its relationship to ethical and unethical work behaviors. If we are successful, this will lead to future research that informs and potentially challenges what we currently know, or think we know, about moral character at this time. The study of character, while no longer in its infancy, is still quite a ways away from mature adulthood. However, given the progress that has been made during the past two decades in the study of personality, behavioral ethics, and moral psychology, we are optimistic for its continued growth and development.

2. Morality is Rooted in Social Relationships

Morality and ethics are terms used to describe standards of right and wrong conduct. We use these terms interchangeably, while noting that some fields prefer the former (e.g., social/personality psychology), while other fields prefer the latter (e.g., organizational behavior/ management). Although the question of "what is ethical" has been the subject of much debate and definitional ambiguity within the organizational behavior literature (Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Brief, 2012; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008), there is now growing consensus among psychologists that what is right versus wrong should be conceptualized as that which regulates social relationships and facilitates group living (Graham et al., 2011; Greene, 2013; Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Morality is not about subjugating personal self-interest, but rather about balancing self-interest with the interests of other people (Frimer, Schaefer, & Oakes, 2014; Frimer, Walker, Dunlop, Lee, & Riches, 2011).[1] Simply put, morality is embedded in our social relationships and our need to regulate them effectively (Rai & Fiske, 2011).

The moral system contains both prescriptive and proscriptive regulations based on the behavioral activation and inhibition regulatory systems (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013). That is to say, ethics and morality contain "dos" and "don'ts", "shoulds" and "should nots"; these guidelines govern our behavior, thoughts, and emotions. Moral motivations come in various forms, some of which are personal (e.g., self-restraint, industriousness), others of which are

[1] In an interesting parallel to how morality is about balancing self-interests with the interests of others, negotiation and conflict management scholars advocate this same strategy for creating value through integrative agreements, based on Pruitt's dual-concerns model of conflict (Pruitt, 1998; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Thus, "best practices" for ethical behavior correspond to best practices for negotiation and conflict management in that both encourage a problem-solving approach that balances strong concerns for others' interests with strong concerns for one's own interests (as opposed to exclusive concern for others or one's self). Although moral character has been found to decrease the likelihood of unethical negotiation behaviors (Cohen, 2010; Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011), to our knowledge, there is currently little data available that speak to whether moral character is associated with greater value creation in negotiation. The relationship between moral character and negotiation outcomes is likely more complex than the relationship between moral character and unethical behavior given that value creation hinges on the inherent interdependence between the negotiating parties.

interpersonal (e.g., not harming, helping), and still others that are at the level of the group or collective (e.g., social order, social justice) (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013).

The different social settings and types of relationships we find ourselves in can make different motivations salient at different times (Rai & Fiske, 2011). Thus, the same moral person will act very differently when group-based moral motives, such as loyalty and communal solidarity, are activated, as compared to when interpersonal moral motives, such as fairness and reciprocity, are activated (cf. Campbell, 1965). Indeed, this is exactly what Cohen, Montoya, and Insko (2006) found in an experiment examining how people with high levels of the moral character trait guilt proneness behaved when feelings of group loyalty were heightened versus when these feelings were inhibited. Highly guilt-prone individuals are among the most moral and cooperative members of society (Cohen et al., 2012; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tangney, Youman, & Stuewig, 2009). They have a strong conscience in that they are more likely than others to feel bad about their behavior when they do something wrong. It is interesting, then, that these moral guilt-prone individuals, who tend to be exceedingly cooperative in interpersonal interactions, acted very uncooperatively—very competitively in fact—in an intergroup interaction in a prisoner's dilemma game when feelings of group loyalty were activated. They did not act competitively toward the opposing group when feelings of group loyalty were inhibited (i.e., when they were instructed to remain detached and not get caught up in how their fellow group members feel). This experiment (Cohen et al., 2006, Study 2) demonstrates that moral character traits, such as guilt proneness, do not foster just one kind of behavior (e.g., cooperation), but rather promote different actions according to the social-relational context and the corresponding moral motivations that are activated in that context. In some cases, the worst

moral offender from an outsider's perspective could be regarded as a moral hero by members of the in-group.

In line with this point, how an individual defines what is right and what is wrong, either consciously or unconsciously, is paramount to understanding how that person will behave. Certainly errors in reasoning can occur, and the wrong social relationships can be given undue influence in people's decision making, even among the most moral individuals among us. Therefore, having high levels of moral character is not a fool-proof antidote to unethical conduct. Decision making biases operating outside of conscious awareness, which give rise to "bounded ethicality" (Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Kern & Chugh, 2009), can still affect those with high levels of moral character. Nonetheless, individuals with low levels of moral character commit a disproportionate and appalling amount of harmful behaviors at their jobs and elsewhere, as we describe in detail throughout this essay. Thus, it is critically important that we understand what moral character is and what moral character does if we are to limit unethical conduct in organizations and society.

The questions of what moral character is and what it does have recently come to the fore in personality psychology, based in large part on an ambitious and successful funding competition sponsored by The Character Project at Wake Forest University and the John Templeton Foundation (http://www.thecharacterproject.com/). The Psychology of Character grant competition, headed by the moral philosopher Christian Miller, and the personality psychologists William Fleeson and Michael Furr, sponsored 12 two-year projects dedicated to exploring the existence and nature of character and its relationship to moral behavior (summaries of these projects can be found at: http://www.thecharacterproject.com/winners.php). Our study of character traits in the workplace was among those selected (Cohen & Panter, 2011-2012) and the

only one to focus specifically on an organizational context. In the sections that follow, we describe what we have learned thus far in our study of moral character at work. We begin by defining what we mean by the term moral character traits and briefly discuss the historical debate about whether they exist.

3. Moral Character & Personality

3.1. Definitions

Moral character can be conceptualized as an individual's disposition to think, feel, and behave in an ethical versus unethical manner, or as the subset of individual differences relevant to morality. This definition of moral character is adapted from Funder and Fast's (2010, p. 669) definition of personality: "An individual's characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior, together with the psychological mechanisms—hidden or not—behind those patterns." Like others (e.g., Fleeson, Furr, Jayawickreme, Meindl, & Helzer, 2014; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), we approach the study of character from a trait theory perspective. A trait refers to an unobservable psychological construct that encapsulates patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior into a coherent unit (Funder & Fast, 2010). This conceptual unit can be used to facilitate understanding of how individuals differ from one another. An implication of viewing moral character as a collection of traits is that we presume individual differences in moral character are stable and enduring but also capable of change over time and across situations. While some may draw strong distinctions between traits, identities, values, habits, and attitudes, we do not make such distinctions here. Instead, we use the term moral character trait broadly to refer to a variety of individual differences. When we discuss our tripartite framework of moral character later in this essay, we elaborate on the individual differences that empirical data suggest are diagnostic of moral character.

3.2. Moral Character & the Person-Situation Debate

The resurgence of interest in the study of character can be seen by the growing number of articles and books on the topic over the past 10 years, despite a decline in attention during most of the twentieth century (Alzola, 2008; Ashton & Lee, 2008a; Cohen et al., 2012; Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2014; Crossan, Mazutis, & Seijts, 2013; Crossan, Mazutis, Seijts, & Gandz, 2013; Fleeson et al., 2014; Frimer et al., 2014; Frimer et al., 2011; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Hill & Roberts, 2010; Kesebir & Kesebir, 2012; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2014; Lee & Ashton, 2012; Lee, Ashton, Morrison, Cordery, & Dunlop, 2008; C. B. Miller, 2013, 2014; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011; Walker & Frimer, 2007; Walker, Frimer, & Dunlop, 2011). To be sure, earlier work exists—notably Robert Hogan's research from the 1970s (Hogan, 1973, 1975)— but, the situationist critique of the existence and importance of individual differences from social psychology (Mischel, 1968; Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Zimbardo, 2004), management (Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Davis-Blake & Pfeffer, 1989), and philosophy (Doris, 2002; Harman, 2009) has until recently turned attention away from personality in favor of situational influences on moral behavior.

Nonetheless, in a reflection of the changing tides, Fleeson and colleagues (2014) recently debunked the myth that character does not have a formidable influence on moral behavior. They did so by pointing out that: 1) the original data used to support the situationist critique (Hartshorne & May, 1928; Hartshorne, May, & Maller, 1929), in fact, show a robust relationship between moral traits and behavior when the results are examined in aggregate rather than piecemeal (e.g., correlations of approximately .60 vs. .20); 2) individual differences in moral character can be measured reliably and validly using established methods and scales from personality psychology; 3) the effect sizes for personality variables and situational variables are

roughly equivalent when multiple behaviors rather than single behaviors are considered (Funder & Ozer, 1983; Richard, Bond, & Stokes-Zoota, 2003); and 4) behavioral inconsistency does not preclude the existence of personality—each person has a central tendency, or disposition, to behave in a certain manner, but there is a distribution, or variability, around that mean (Fleeson, 2001).

None of this is to say that situational influences are unimportant or irrelevant for predicting moral behavior—certainly that is not the case. Strong evidence exists for situational and structural influences as well as for personality influences (for reviews, see Ariely, 2012; Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Greve, Palmer, & Pozner, 2010; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010; Moore & Gino, 2013; Palmer, 2012; Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2014). Rather, the evidence Fleeson and colleagues (2014) present highlights the fact that the person-situation debate should no longer be in question. It ended with what Fleeson and Noftle (2008a) term a "Hegelian synthesis" that integrates the two opposing positions. Behavior is a function of personality factors and situational factors; they work in conjunction and reciprocally, with neither force more powerful than the other (for more on this debate and its resolution, see the special issue of Journal of Research in Personality edited by Donnellan, Lucas, & Fleeson, 2009). There are many types of consistency, including, for example, cross-situational consistency of single behaviors (i.e., the enactment of a single behavior by the same person in different contexts), and "consistency of contingency," referring to reliable changes in a person's behavior (different from how others change their behaviors) in response to changing situations (Fleeson & Noftle, 2008a, 2008b). Recognition of the different ways in which people can be consistent and inconsistent with regards to their behavior has

contributed to the current detente in what Robert Hogan has labeled "the personality wars" (Hogan, 2007).

As reviews of situational and organizational influences on unethical behavior are widespread, we focus our attention in the current essay on personality influences on unethical behavior. This is a subject that has gained considerable empirical ground in recent years—for example, in the voluminous research on the HEXACO model of personality and the importance of the Honesty-Humility factor (Ashton & Lee, 2007, 2008a; Ashton, Lee, & Vries, 2014; Lee & Ashton, 2012)—but, as of yet, has received relatively scant attention in the organizational behavior literature on behavioral ethics, aside from several reviews by Treviño and colleagues that consider both person and situation factors (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Treviño et al., 2014).[2]

3.3. Personality Traits Predict Harmful and Helpful Work Behaviors

In our work, we have studied the relationship between moral character and moral behavior by investigating the frequency with which employees commit counterproductive work behaviors (CWB) and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB)—behaviors that are considered immoral and moral by working adults. CWB are behaviors that harm organizations and the people within them (Fox & Spector, 2005; Spector et al., 2006). Conversely, OCB are behaviors that help organizations and the people within them (Fox, Spector, Goh, Bruursema, & Kessler, 2012; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Organ, 2006). Examples of the former include lying, stealing, and verbally or physically abusing coworkers, whereas examples of the latter include mentoring, volunteering, and accommodating coworkers' needs regarding scheduling, vacation

[2]A large and growing body of research investigating personality influences on unethical behavior can also be found in Industrial/Organizational (I/O) Psychology, specifically in research investigating the relationship between "Big Five" personality factors and counterproductive work behaviors (Berry, Carpenter, & Barratt, 2012; Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007) and in research on integrity testing (Marcus, Lee, & Ashton, 2007; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 1993; Van Iddekinge, Roth, Raymark, & Odle-Dusseau, 2012a).

time, and other work issues. It is clear from this list of examples that CWB hinders cooperation and group functioning, whereas OCB facilitates cooperation and group functioning.

We consider harmful work behaviors (i.e., CWB) unethical because they are antagonistic to relationship regulation—the purpose of morality according to social scientists (Graham et al., 2011; Greene, 2013; Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Likewise, we consider helpful work behaviors (i.e., OCB) ethical because they aid in relationship regulation. Empirical evidence supporting this theoretical conceptualization comes from a study in which we surveyed more than 400 working adults across the U.S. about their moral judgments of 32 acts of CWB and 20 acts of OCB (Cohen et al., 2014). We used a bipolar rating scale ranging from extremely immoral to extremely moral. All of the CWB acts were judged to be significantly more immoral than the neutral midpoint on the rating scale and all of the OCB acts were judged to be significantly more moral than the neutral midpoint on the rating scale. These moral judgments are consistent with the idea that harmful acts are the hallmarks of unethical/immoral behavior and helpful acts are the hallmarks of ethical/moral behavior (Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012).

Whereas CWB and OCB are behaviors that are unambiguously harmful and helpful, there are some workplace behaviors that are more ambiguous—behaviors that are helpful to those within the organization but simultaneously harmful to those outside the organization. Behaviors that help the organization but harm those outside of it can be conceptualized as unethical pro-organizational behaviors (Umphress & Bingham, 2010). Examples include cases of corporate crime in which individuals violate the law so as to help their organization or coworkers (e.g., accounting fraud to cover up losses or to protect the jobs of colleagues). We have not focused on such behaviors in our research, as they represent moral dilemmas in which it is difficult to

determine what is right and what is wrong. Instead, we focus on behaviors that are unequivocally helpful both to the organization and society more generally (OCB) or unequivocally harmful to the organization and society more generally (CWB). Whether moral character would encourage or discourage unethical pro-organizational behaviors is likely to hinge on the relationships and corresponding moral motives that are salient to the decision maker in that environment at that particular time, consistent with the relationship regulation view of morality (Rai & Fiske, 2011).

In a recent article, we examined more than two dozen individual differences potentially relevant to moral character, and tested how each of these traits related to CWB and OCB (Cohen et al., 2014). This project involved conducting a three-month work diary study in which roughly 1,500 employees in different organizations across the U.S. reported on their personality and work behaviors. We collected 12 weekly self-reports of employees' CWB and OCB, and we collected coworker reports of these behaviors after a period of one month by requesting that each participant ask a coworker to complete a survey about him or her. This survey asked the coworker about his or her colleague's CWB, OCB, and personality (as well as his or her own CWB, OCB, and personality). Moral character traits and other aspects of the employees' personalities were measured in the initial and final surveys in the diary study with commonly-used self-report inventories, such as the HEXACO personality inventory (Ashton & Lee, 2009), the Guilt and Shame Proneness (GASP) scale (Cohen et al., 2011), the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983), and the Self-Importance of Moral Identity Scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002).

We classified the employees as having low, average, or high levels of moral character by conducting a latent profile analysis of the self-reported responses to the personality questionnaires from the initial survey. This analysis identifies groups of people who are similar to others in their class and different from people in other classes with regard to the set of

measured variables in the analysis, which in our case is a set of moral character traits (Flaherty & Kiff, 2012; Wang & Hanges, 2011). We examined how frequently the three classes of employees committed 32 acts of CWB and 20 acts of OCB according to their weekly self-reports and their coworkers' observations. These behaviors were measured with the 32-item CWB Checklist (Spector et al., 2006) and the 20-item OCB Checklist (Fox et al., 2012). Figures 1 and 2 display a summary of the results.

As shown in Figure 1, employees classified as low in moral character on the basis of their self-reported personality traits committed substantially more CWB during the three-month study than the other employees. By their own account, these employees committed an average of 16 acts of CWB each week; compare that to the average of 1 act of CWB committed each week by the employees classified as high in moral character (Cohen's $d = 0.77$, $p < .001$). The difference was just as striking when the coworkers' observations of CWB were considered. Employees classified as low in moral character on the basis of their self-reported personality traits were observed by coworkers to have committed an average of 9 acts of CWB during the previous month, whereas those classified as high in moral character were only observed to have committed an average of 2 acts of CWB during that same month (Cohen's $d = 0.52$, $p < .001$). The majority of the employees in the study were classified as neither low nor high but average in moral character, and fortunately, their CWB levels were much more similar to those in the high-moral-character class than to those in the low-moral-character class, with an average of 3 acts self-reported each week, and 3 acts observed by coworkers over one month. These results imply that employees with low levels of moral character have a disproportionately negative impact on the people with whom they work and the organizations that employ them. Given that CWB costs organizations billions of dollars each year (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Berry et al., 2012), our

results reify the adage about bad apples spoiling the bunch (Felps, Mitchell, & Byington, 2006), and highlight the devastating psychological and financial costs of having employees low in moral character in your organization.

Turning to Figure 2, we see clear differences between the three moral-character classes in the coworkers' observations of OCB; however, the differences are less pronounced in the OCB self-reports. The employees classified as low in moral character on the basis of their self-reported personality traits were observed by coworkers to have committed substantially less OCB as compared to those classified as high in moral character: an average of 19 acts of OCB over a one month period for those in the low-moral-character class versus an average of 37 acts of OCB over that same period for those in the high-moral-character class (Cohen's $d = 0.93$, $p < .001$). The average moral character class was in the middle, with an average of 27 acts of OCB observed by the coworkers of those employees during the one month period (Cohen's $d = 0.45$, $p < .01$ compared to the low class; Cohen's $d = 0.50$, $p < .001$ compared to the high class). It is unclear why the OCB self-reports did not show as strong a pattern as compared to the coworker reports, but descriptively, the high-moral-character class did report marginally more OCB each week (17 acts) than the low-moral-character class (15 acts) (Cohen's $d = 0.13$, $p = .07$).

Importantly, the findings for moral character predicting CWB and OCB persisted when we statistically controlled for basic demographic and organizational characteristics, none of which had a robust influence on CWB and OCB (Cohen et al., 2014). Surprisingly, and inconsistent with what one would expect from a situationist perspective, the presence and enforcement of an ethics code in the organization did not have a reliable effect on CWB or OCB, and neither did income or organizational sector. The null results for these organizational variables indicate that employees working in non-profit organizations with strongly enforced

codes of ethical conduct were just as likely to commit CWB as compared to employees working in private for-profit companies without formal ethical codes. And, in contrast to the idea that higher social class increases unethical behavior (Côté, 2011; Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012; Trautmann, Kuilen, & Zeckhauser, 2013), the participants making six-figure salaries acted no more or less ethically than the participants with little annual income. The relationship between social class and unethical behavior varies across different operationalizations of these constructs (Trautmann et al., 2013)—our data suggest that it does not hold for income and CWB. Nevertheless, regardless of the employee's income, or the type of job or organization they hailed from, those with low levels of moral character lied, cheated, and stole more than their colleagues. They mistreated others more frequently and were less willing to help coworkers in need of assistance.

To summarize, certain people are more prone than others to act unethically at their jobs, and others are more prone to act ethically. We can measure these dispositions with self-report personality questionnaires and/or with observer reports from coworkers (Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2013), at least in anonymous research settings where employees have little incentive to hide their true personalities. The extent to which moral character traits can be reliably gauged in job interviews and other high-stakes settings where individuals are motivated to make a good impression is subject to ongoing and heated debate (cf. Harris et al., 2012; Ones et al., 1993; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 2012; Sackett & Schmitt, 2012; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Van Iddekinge et al., 2012a; Van Iddekinge, Roth, Raymark, & Odle-Dusseau, 2012b). In our view, the existing evidence is, on balance, favorable to the claim that moral character can be measured even in situations in which impression management concerns are strong (Cohen, Kim, Jordan, & Panter, 2014). As we develop better understanding of the traits that are indicative of

moral character and the appropriate methods for measuring them, we will no doubt see corresponding improvements in integrity testing.

As a rough approximation, we estimate that employees low in moral character comprise 20% to 30% of working adults in the U.S. However, we do not know whether these individuals are distributed randomly across different occupations or whether they are more concentrated in certain sectors, positions, or industries than others. One might imagine that individuals with low levels of moral character are drawn to certain types of jobs (e.g., high status positions with potential for making large sums of money), whereas those with high levels of moral character are drawn to other types of jobs (e.g., jobs that involve helping people without much opportunity for personal gain). This idea is in line with the idea that personality can influence behavior via situation selection and situation creation, which we describe in more detail in Section 5 of this essay. One could also imagine that working in certain types of jobs could cause changes in one's moral character, with some positions bringing about positive character development and others causing negative transformations (Roberts, 2006). At the moment though, we are not aware of systematic evidence that bears on these claims.

Along these same lines, we do not know whether people higher up the organizational ladder tend to be higher or lower in moral character, although there has been much speculation about this topic in the academic and popular press—for example, the claim that many CEOs are psychopaths (Ronson, 2011). As noted earlier, it has been suggested that higher social class is associated with greater unethical behavior (Côté, 2011; Piff et al., 2012; Trautmann et al., 2013). However, because the relationship between social class and morality is complex, future research is needed to determine the robustness and generality of this association across the different ways social class can be defined and measured. Our data do not suggest a relationship between social

class and moral character when social class is operationalized as a person's annual income or as their educational attainment (Cohen et al., 2014), but that does not mean that a different pattern could emerge if social class were to be operationalized in another manner. We encourage future research to explore this topic more deeply by systematically investigating the different ways social class can be conceptualized and operationalized.

4. Moral Character: What It Is

When it comes to predicting moral behavior in organizations, which individual differences matter, and which do not? These questions bring us to the heart of our essay. We propose a tripartite framework for understanding moral character, with the idea that it has motivational, ability, and identity elements. Figure 3 summarizes our framework. Briefly, the three elements capture: (1) one's desire to do good and avoid doing bad (*motivation*); (2) one's capacity to do good and avoid doing bad (*ability*); and (3) one's identity as a good versus bad person (*identity*).

The categories in our framework do not represent orthogonal, mutually exclusive, personality dimensions, but rather broad conceptual groupings. Moral character traits can tap into more than one of the categories, such as, for example, guilt proneness. Guilt proneness arguably relates to all three elements in our model. Presumably, people who are more considerate of others are more prone to feeling guilty for harming them; and feeling guilty about violations of self-control could lead to better self-regulation. Furthermore, people for whom morality is more central to their identity are more likely to feel guilty when they act inconsistently with that identity. These claims are supported by sizeable correlations between guilt proneness and traits reflecting the consideration of others (e.g., empathy and Honesty-Humility) and the centrality of moral identity (moral identity internalization), as well as somewhat smaller, but still significant,

correlations between guilt proneness and traits reflecting self-regulation (e.g., self-control and Conscientiousness) (Cohen et al., 2011, 2014; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). That guilt proneness conceptually and empirically relates to all three moral character elements suggests a reason why it is such a powerful deterrent of unethical and illegal behavior (Cohen, Panter, & Turan, 2013; Cohen, Panter, Turan, et al., 2013; Tangney, Stuewig, & Martinez, 2014).

In the next three sections, we unpack the elements in our character framework and describe assorted traits that reflect these elements.

4.1. Motivational Element of Moral Character: Consideration of Others

The first element in our tripartite model of moral character involves consideration of others' wants and needs, and how one's actions affect other people. We conceptualize consideration of others as a motivational component of character because such consideration motivates people to treat others fairly and considerately, which is required for successful relationship regulation and group functioning. Without some level of concern for other people, one is unlikely to be willing to balance self-interest with the interests of others. Thus, the consideration of others category in our model captures individual differences that motivate individuals to act ethically and refrain from acting unethically.

The broad personality dimension that is most closely linked to consideration of others is Honesty-Humility, or "the H-factor" of personality (Ashton & Lee, 2008a; Lee & Ashton, 2012). Honesty-Humility "represents the tendency to be fair and genuine in dealing with others, in the sense of cooperating with others even when one might exploit them without suffering retaliation" (Ashton & Lee, 2007, p. 157). As is clear by this definition, Honesty-Humility directly relates to morality in that it is involves balancing self-interest with the interests of others in the service of maintaining positive social relationships.

To fully understand the H-factor, one must first understand the model of personality structure from which it derives—the HEXACO model (Ashton & Lee, 2007, 2008a; Ashton et al., 2014; Lee & Ashton, 2012). A wealth of empirical evidence confirms that there are six dimensions that constitute the landscape of personality: (H) Honesty-Humility, (E) Emotionality, (X) Extraversion, (A) Agreeableness, (C) Conscientiousness, and (O) Openness to Experience. Each of these dimensions represents a broad personality factor that encompasses various localized facets. Honesty-Humility encompasses sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance, and modesty; Emotionality encompasses fearfulness, anxiety, dependence, and sentimentality; Extraversion encompasses expressiveness, social boldness, sociability, and liveliness; Agreeableness encompasses forgivingness, gentleness, flexibility, and patience; Conscientiousness encompasses organization, diligence, perfectionism, and prudence; and Openness to Experience encompasses aesthetic appreciation, inquisitiveness, creativity, and unconventionality.

We know that there are six broad personality dimensions from lexical studies that factor analyze large pools of adjectives in different languages to uncover their underlying structure. The HEXACO model has been recovered without fail in a dozen different languages, including Croatian, Dutch, English, Filipino, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Korean, Polish, and Turkish (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Ashton et al., 2014). Of course, there are languages and cultures that have yet to be studied. Nonetheless, the six HEXACO factors are widely recovered across the world's major languages, and no set of seven or more factors is reliably recovered.

Earlier models of personality structure focused on only five dimensions, neglecting the Honesty-Humility factor for a variety of methodological, conceptual, and historical reasons (for reviews, see Ashton & Lee, 2007; Ashton & Lee, 2008a; Ashton et al., 2014; Lee & Ashton,

2012). The Big Five model of personality structure proposed that Emotional Stability, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience represent the core dimensions of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1987). While Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience correspond closely to the HEXACO analogues of these factors, Emotional Stability and Agreeableness in the Big Five differ conceptually and empirically from their HEXACO counterparts (Ashton et al., 2014). The facets of personality that are captured by the Agreeableness, Emotionality, and Honesty-Humility factors in the HEXACO are distributed differently in the Big Five, and some facets of Honesty-Humility are not captured at all by the Big Five factors. Key distinctions with regard to the Agreeableness and Emotionality factors relate to sentimentality and anger. Sentimentality is part of the Emotionality factor in the HEXACO but is part of the Agreeableness factor in the Big Five. Anger (or lack thereof) is part of the Agreeableness factor in the HEXACO but is part of the Emotional Stability factor in the Big Five (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Ashton et al., 2014).

The key reason why the HEXACO model dominates the Big Five model empirically is that the Big Five factors are not as reliably recovered across different languages as compared to the HEXACO. For example, unlike the HEXACO, the Big Five factor model is not recovered in Greek or Hungarian, and sometimes not in Italian (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Ashton et al., 2014). In these languages, the Honesty-Humility factor from the HEXACO emerges in five-factor solutions but an Intellect/Imagination factor (i.e., Openness to Experience) fails to emerge. In contrast, when a six-factor solution is estimated in these languages, all six HEXACO factors are reliably recovered. Moreover, Honesty-Humility has a stronger link to moral behavior than any of the other five broad dimensions of personality, with the possible exception of Conscientiousness (Ashton & Lee, 2008b; Cohen et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2008; Marcus et al.,

2007). We think this is because Honesty-Humility reflects consideration of others. Agreeableness also taps into consideration of others to some extent, and as such, it is somewhat relevant to moral character, but less so than Honesty-Humility (Cohen et al., 2014).

A person who is high on Honesty-Humility is honest, modest, and fair; a person low on Honesty-Humility is deceitful, boastful, and greedy. Accordingly, high levels of this personality trait are associated with cooperation with others and a decreased focus on personal gain, whereas low levels of this trait are associated with exploitation of others and selfish behavior (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009). In a demonstration of the power of low Honesty-Humility to predict unethical behavior, a laboratory-based experiment in which undergraduate students could earn extra pay by lying about their performance on an anagram-solving task revealed that cheating could be reliably predicted by self-reports of Honesty-Humility, but not the other HEXACO factors (Hershfield, Cohen, & Thompson, 2012, Study 4). In the workplace, Honesty-Humility is positively related to OCB, and is negatively related to CWB, although its relationship with CWB is stronger and more robust than its relationship with OCB (Bourdage, Lee, Lee, & Shin, 2012; Cohen, Panter, Turan, et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 2014; Lee, Ashton, & de Vries, 2005; Marcus et al., 2007). The association between Honesty-Humility and unethical behavior holds regardless of whether these constructs are measured with self-reports or observer reports (Cohen, Panter, Turan, et al., 2013). Given the importance of Honesty-Humility in predicting whether a person will lie, cheat, and steal, it should come as no surprise that people believe that knowledge of this trait is among the most important attributes one can know about a person (Cooley, Rea, Insko, & Payne, 2013; Cottrell, Neuberg, & Li, 2007; Goodwin et al., 2014).

Closely related to Honesty-Humility is a trait introduced in the 1970s called Machiavellianism. Machiavellianism is indicative of a tendency to manipulate and deceive other

people, and therefore represents a lack of consideration of others (Christie & Geis, 1970). It is a member of the "Dark Triad" of personality, along with psychopathy and narcissism (O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), which also, to varying degrees, capture a lack of consideration of others. Given the close conceptual association between Machiavellianism and Honesty-Humility, it is perhaps unsurprising that individuals who are high on the former are low on the latter—the correlation between the two constructs is approximately -.50 (Cohen et al., 2014; Lee & Ashton, 2005). Like Honesty-Humility, Machiavellianism is associated with unethical choices in the workplace and various other social contexts (Cohen et al., 2014; Hegarty & Sims, 1978; D. N. Jones & Paulhus, 2009; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; O'Boyle et al., 2012).

Similar to Machiavellianism, individual differences in moral disengagement also are indicative of a lack of consideration of others, and predict unethical choices (Bandura, 1999; Cohen et al., 2014; Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008; Moore, Detert, Klebe Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012; Ogunfowora & Bourdage, 2014; Ogunfowora, Bourdage, & Nguyen, 2013). Moral disengagement represents a tendency to interpret ethically questionable behavior as not being particularly harmful to others, thereby allowing one to transgress without feeling that moral principles have been violated. People who morally disengage use an array of mental techniques (i.e., cognitive mechanisms) to dissociate their moral standards from their moral conduct (Bandura, 1999; Moore et al., 2012). For instance, a person may compare negative behavior to more egregious acts in order to make it appear less harmful. Moral disengagement is positively correlated with Machiavellianism (r = .44) and negatively correlated with Honesty-Humility (r = -.48) (Cohen et al., 2014). Furthermore, people who have a propensity to morally disengage are more likely than others to make unethical decisions in business contexts, particularly with reference to behaviors that yield personal benefits but are harmful to the general public (Ogunfowora & Bourdage, 2014; Ogunfowora et al., 2013). Recent research indicates that people who morally disengage are less likely to both view themselves and be nominated by their peers as group leaders, which suggests that possessing high levels of this trait may have substantial long-term consequences for one's career (Ogunfowora & Bourdage, 2014).

In contrast to individuals who have a disposition toward moral disengagement and being Machiavellian, individuals with an empathic disposition are very likely to consider the thoughts and feelings of other people. Empathic concern and perspective taking are moral character traits that represent the emotional and cognitive dimensions of empathy, respectively (Davis, 1983). Empathic concern is indicative of a disposition toward experiencing feelings of warmth, sympathy, and compassion for others. Perspective taking is indicative of a disposition toward considering other people's point of view—the tendency to imagine oneself "in another's shoes." There are large literatures in developmental and social/personality psychology establishing the

importance of empathy for moral development and behavior (Batson et al., 2003; Eisenberg, 2000; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; P. A. Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). Less attention has been given to empathy in the field of organizational behavior. Nonetheless, empathy, by definition, relates to the consideration of others, so we see it as a hallmark of the motivational element of our moral character framework. Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that in our diary study of character traits in the workplace, we found empathic concern and perspective taking to be particularly diagnostic indicators of moral character. Both of these character traits reliably predicted CWB and OCB, regardless of whether the work behaviors were measured with self-reports or observer reports from coworkers (Cohen et al., 2014).

Finally, we would be remiss if we neglected to discuss individual differences in moral foundations given the amount of research attention this model has generated in recent years (Graham et al., 2013; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Graham et al., 2011; Haidt, 2007). Research by Jonathan Haidt, Jesse Graham, and colleagues has revealed the existence of five foundational moral values that underlie people's ethical decision making: 1) Harm/Care 2) Fairness/Reciprocity, 3) Ingroup/Loyalty, 4) Authority/Respect, and 5) Purity/Sanctity. Whereas some of these values relate more closely to relations between individuals (i.e., Harm/Care, Fairness/Reciprocity), others relate more closely to relations within and between groups (i.e., Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and to a lesser extent Purity/Sanctity). Nonetheless, in different ways, all five of these moral foundations reflect the consideration of others, broadly construed.

Often, the most difficult choices people must make are those in which different moral foundations are in conflict. Whistleblowing, for example, involves a conflict between moral values related to fairness versus loyalty (Waytz, Dungan, & Young, 2013), raising the question, which others should we be most considerate of? It is difficult to determine what choices moral character would or should predict in such situations. We presume that whistleblowing decisions vary according to which relationships and corresponding moral motives are most salient to the potential whistleblower at that particular time, in that particular context. This reasoning is consistent with the idea posited at the outset of this essay that morality is embedded in our social

relationships and character-driven behavior varies accordingly. Thus, when certain relationships are valued more than others, moral character can facilitate behaviors that might seem moral to some (i.e., in-group members), but immoral to others (i.e., those outside the group). Extreme forms of such behaviors include honor killings, suicide bombings, and other forms of intergroup violence (Campbell, 1965; Cohen et al., 2006; Rai & Fiske, 2011).

4.2. Ability Element of Moral Character: Self-Regulation

The second element in our framework captures individual differences that are indicative of an ability to act ethically and refrain from acting unethically. It comprises various traits related to the regulation of one's behavior, specifically with reference to behaviors that may have positive short-term consequences but negative long-term consequences for oneself or others. Examples of traits that relate to self-regulation include Conscientiousness, self-control, and consideration of future consequences.

Conscientiousness, like Honesty-Humility, is one of the six broad dimensions of personality (Ashton & Lee, 2007). A person who is high on Conscientiousness is dependable, self-disciplined, and careful; a person low on Conscientiousness is irresponsible, lazy, and disorganized. Conscientiousness is one of the strongest predictors of counterproductive behaviors and job performance, with links to reduced absenteeism, procrastination, fighting with coworkers, and abusive leadership (Berry et al., 2012; Berry et al., 2007; Cohen et al., 2014; Nandkeolyar, Shaffer, Li, Ekkirala, & Bagger, 2014; Roberts, Jackson, Fayard, Edmonds, & Meints, 2009). As such, it is a chief focus of integrity tests (Marcus et al., 2007; Ones et al., 1993; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Van Iddekinge et al., 2012a). Differences between employees with low versus high levels of Conscientiousness become particularly apparent when stress is high, such as when one is mistreated by one’s supervisor. In these settings, there are pronounced

differences in how highly conscientious versus non-conscientious employees respond, with the former much less likely than the latter to retaliate against the perpetrator and/or the organization that allowed such mistreatment to occur (Kim, Cohen, & Panter, 2014; Nandkeolyar et al., 2014). Simply put, highly conscientious employees are more likely than others to persist at their work in the face of difficult challenges, whether those challenges are other people or the task itself. With regard to positive behaviors, high levels of Conscientiousness are particularly likely to predict OCB when such behavior could result in positive long-term outcomes, such as a promotion (Borman, Penner, Allen, & Motowidlo, 2001; Podsakoff et al., 2006).

The broad personality dimension of Conscientiousness is closely related to the narrower trait of self-control. Self-control refers to the degree to which a person inhibits immediate gratification in order to achieve long-term goals (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). People with low levels of self-control (whether trait-based or situation-specific) are less able to overide their impulses and temptations, which increases their likelihood of engaging in selfish and aggressive behaviors when depleted (Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011; Lian et al., 2014; Malouf et al., 2014; Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009). In organizations, we have found that employees with high dispositional levels of self-control are less likely to commit CWB and more likley to commit OCB (Cohen et al., 2014).

Like Conscientiousness and self-control, individuals who score highly on measures of consideration of future consequences (CFC) refrain from engaging in unethical behavior. CFC captures the extent to which the potential future outcomes of one's actions influence present behavior (Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger, & Edwards, 1994). We consider this trait part of the ability element of moral character rather than the motivational element because it relates more

closely to self-regulation than to consideration of others. People who consider future consequences anticipate how their current actions affect the attainment of their long-term goals and adjust their present behavior so that it aligns with these goals. Thus, consideration of future consequences facilitates self-control and promotes conscientious behaviors. CFC is particularly advantageous for moral decision making because it enables people to discount immediate benefits associated with unethical behavior and instead focus on the potential long-term consequences of such actions. Accordingly, people with high levels of CFC are less likely to display aggression toward others when they believe that such behavior could be costly to the self at a future point in time (Joireman, Anderson, & Strathman, 2003). They are also more likely to disapprove of unethical business tactics, including lying in negotiations and bribing others to gather information (Hershfield et al., 2012). Individual differences in CFC are associated with reduced CWB and increased OCB (Cohen et al., 2014), likely because the former behavior results in negative future outcomes (e.g., being mistreated by one's coworkers and superiors), whereas the latter results in positive future outcomes (e.g., being well-liked by one's coworkers and superiors).

In settings involving intergroup conflict, the consideration of future consequences reduces distrust and competition between opposing groups, regardless of whether such consideration is dispositionally based or induced via psychological or structural interventions (Cohen & Insko, 2008; Insko et al., 2001; Insko et al., 1998; Wolf et al., 2009). As famously described by Axelrod (1984, p. 174), cooperation emerges when the future has a "sufficiently large shadow." He highlighted this principle with trench warfare examples from World War I. The small warring units that faced one another for protracted periods of time recognized that

their futures would indeed be poor—or fail to exist—if they did not cooperate via cease fires or firing over each other's heads.

4.3. Identity Element of Moral Character: Centrality of Moral Identity

The identity element of moral character refers to a disposition toward viewing morality as important and central to one's self-concept. This category captures individual differences that indicate a deep concern about being a moral person and viewing oneself accordingly. Moral identity internalization is the defining characteristic of the identity element of our framework (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Individual differences in the internalization of moral identity are indicative of the extent to which morality is important to an individual's private sense of self. People who have highly internalized moral identities construct their sense of who they are around a set of moral trait associations—they want to be the kind of person who is caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, and kind. Indeed, these are the nine adjectives in the Self-Importance of Moral Identity scale that is generally used to measure this individual difference (Aquino & Reed, 2002). It is in this way that moral identity relates to the two other elements of our character framework. A person with a highly internalized moral identity wants to be the kind of person who is generous and hardworking—that is, they value consideration of others and self-regulation. Accordingly, we observe moderate correlations (~.30 to .50) between moral identity and the Honesty-Humility and Conscientiousness factors of the HEXACO (Cohen et al., 2014).

Somewhat different from our trait perspective on moral character, Aquino and colleagues (2009) advocate a social-cognitive conception of moral identity. According to this view, the effect of moral identity on ethical and unethical conduct is determined in large part by which aspects of one's identity are made accessible in a particular situation (see also, Lapsley &

Narvaez, 2014). That is, situational factors, such as a financial incentive (or thinking about the bible) can decrease (or increase) the accessibility of morality to one's self-concept, and thereby attenuate (or exacerbate) the link between moral identity and moral behavior (Aquino & Freeman, 2009). While social-cognitive views of personality are often regarded as quite different from trait views, we think they are actually highly compatible in that both social-cognitive and trait perspectives on personality recognize that trait-consistent behaviors only emerge when situations afford such behavior. Indeed, this point was made explicitly by Funder and Fast (2010) in their comprehensive review of the personality literature in the most recent volume of the *Handbook of Social Psychology.* They point out that there is not much difference between saying "a person who is more extraverted is more likely to be talkative in social situations" (trait view) versus "'if' a particular person perceives a situation as social, 'then' that individual will talk" (social-cognitive view), with the former, trait-based statement a bit easier to communicate (Funder & Fast, 2010, p. 676).

A potential consequence of viewing morality as a core aspect of one's identity is that one becomes strongly motivated to behave in ways consistent with one's moral ideals (Blasi, 1984). Indeed, cognitive dissonance, guilt, and shame tend to arise when people behave inconsistently with valued identities. Consequently, having a highly internalized moral identity is associated with a variety of ethical behaviors, including, on the negative side, reduced CWB, delinquency, lying, and cheating, and, on the positive side, increased OCB, volunteering for worthy causes, and charitable giving (Aquino & Freeman, 2009; Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009; Aquino & Reed, 2002; Cohen et al., 2014; Gino et al., 2011; Reed & Aquino, 2003). Moral identity internalization is also positively related to ethical leadership behaviors, such as treating followers fairly, communicating ethics within the organization, and caring about the environment (Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012).

It is important to note that moral identity internalization is often regarded in the literature as a self-regulatory mechanism that prevents people from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards of right and wrong (Aquino et al., 2009; Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 1984). While we acknowledge that moral identity shares some overlap with the self-regulation element of character (and is moderately correlated with Conscientiousness), we believe that individual differences in moral identity internalization are somewhat different than the individual differences captured by the self-regulation element of our model. Thus, we think it makes sense to treat moral identity as a separate aspect of character. Consistent with this treatment, empirical work by Gino and colleagues (2011) demonstrates that moral identity internalization predicts

unethical behavior independently from self-control. They found that individuals with highly internalized moral identities were more likely than others to refrain from cheating for financial gain regardless of whether their self-control levels were high or depleted.

4.4. Moral Reasoning Ability is Not a Critical Element of Moral Character

Notably absent from our model of moral character is moral reasoning ability. Moral reasoning ability—often referred to as cognitive moral development—has received considerable attention in psychology, organizational behavior, and related fields. The concept dates back to Kohlberg's work from the 1960s (Kohlberg, 1969), and undergirds prominent theories of ethical decision making in organizations (e.g., Hannah, Avolio, & May, 2011; T. M. Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986; Treviño, 1986). Cognitive moral development is indicative of a person's sophistication of moral thought, particularly with reference to judgments about difficult hypothetical moral dilemmas. One such moral quandary is the widely known Heinz dilemma from the Kohlberg-inspired Defining Issues Test, in which a husband must decide whether to steal an expensive drug in order to prevent his wife from dying of a rare form of cancer (Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999). A person's level of cognitive moral development is based on the complexity of the reasoning process underlying decisions in such dilemmas, and not on the decisions themselves.

According to the theory, moral reasoning ability develops over time across six stages of moral judgment, with each stage representing a coherent structure of thought (Kohlberg, 1969, 1981; Rest et al., 1999). Individuals progress through these stages in order but rarely reach the last stage of development. At the beginning stages, individuals view behavior as wrongful when it results in punishment and moral when it satisfies one's interests. During the middle stages, behavior is considered moral when it conforms to societal rules about right and wrong, maintains social cohesiveness, and is performed with good intentions. Most individuals operate in the middle stages of cognitive moral development. The few who reach the final stage of cognitive moral development make moral judgments based on how well they uphold abstract moral principles such as fairness and justice. This form of thinking is regarded as the height of moral reasoning ability because the individual is able to recognize that social conceptions of morality can be superseded and transformed.

The link between cognitive moral development and ethical decision making is well-documented in the business literature (Ashkanasy, Windsor, & Trevino, 2006; Kish-Gephart et

al., 2010; Ponemon, 1990; Schwepker, 1999; Trevino & Youngblood, 1990). A meta-analysis by Kish-Gephart and colleagues (2010) indicated that higher levels of cognitive moral development correlated negatively with unethical choices at work. While we agree that cognitive moral development can decrease the propensity to engage in some forms of unethical conduct, we suggest that it may not be particularly well-suited to influencing more common and mundane choices, such as the decision to commit CWB. Moreover, we suspect its strength as a predictor of unethical work behaviors is weak relative to the character traits encapsulated by our tripartite moral character framework. This assertion stems from the results of our work diary study, which revealed that cognitive moral development was largely unrelated to the other character traits we examined, and its relationships with CWB and OCB were negligible (Cohen et al., 2014). We assume that this is because cognitive moral development captures how one thinks about complicated dilemmas in which different values are in conflict, whereas CWB and OCB represent more straightforward decisions, in which there is widespread agreement about the morality of the choices (Cohen et al., 2014).

4.5. Moral Character Synopsis

Before moving on to the next section where we describe what moral character does, let us first summarize our thoughts on what moral character is. Again, we propose that moral character can be summarized by three key elements, as shown in Figure 3: consideration of others, self-regulation, and moral identity. The most moral among us have high standing on each of these elements of character, whereas the most immoral among us have low standing on each of these elements. Whether high levels of any one of these elements is necessary and sufficient for promoting moral behavior is unknown at this time, as is whether low levels of any one of these elements is necessary and sufficient for promoting immoral behavior. Nonetheless, it seems

reasonable to assume that consideration of others is a requisite component of moral character given that morality, by definition, is about regulating our social relationships (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Self-regulation abilities, on their own, do not seem to be sufficient for encouraging moral behavior in that such behavior is unlikely to be enacted unless these abilities are accompanied by a consideration of others and/or a desire to see oneself as a moral person. Nor does it seem likely that moral identity alone would adequately deter unethical conduct as it lacks the critical action component provided by self-regulation and the motivational component provided by consideration of others. An important area for future research is to more deeply explore how the three elements in our model separately and jointly determine moral behavior. Are their effects additive or interactive? Likewise, future research is needed to determine whether these three moral character elements represent an exhaustive list. We suspect the answer is no and welcome extensions to our model if there are key areas that we have neglected.

At this time, there is no gold standard instrument for measuring moral character. To be sure, multitudes of personality scales and integrity tests have been developed and are employed widely by researchers and practitioners. However, there is not currently a widely-accepted organizing theoretical framework for determining which aspects of personality are diagnostic of moral character. We hope our research facilitates change in this area by integrating disparate streams of literature into a more coherent body of work.

5. Moral Character: What it Does

Having now unpacked what we think moral character is, we turn our attention to what moral character does, with a focus on how it influences unethical behavior, situation selection, and situation creation. We bypass the issue of moral awareness, which many OB scholars focus

on when theorizing about ethics and morality (e.g., T. M. Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986; Trevino, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). Drawing instead on Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe's (2008) two-by-two typology of ethical decision making, we separate awareness from behavior, assuming that decisions can lead to ethical or unethical behavior, and good or bad outcomes, regardless of whether decision makers are aware of the moral implications of their choices. This perspective is in contrast to theoretical frameworks that assume moral awareness is the first step in moral decision making (T. M. Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986). The majority of decisions employees and managers face can be moralized or, conversely, viewed pragmatically, as rational, economic, or business decisions (Kreps & Monin, 2011). Just because one moralizes an issue, publically or privately, does not mean ensuing decisions will be morally good or bad. Thus, like Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe (2008), we view moral awareness and behavior as separable and potentially orthogonal dimensions.

5.1. Character Predicts Unethical Behaviors

In the previous sections of this essay, we discussed the results of our work diary study of employees' CWB and OCB (Figures 1 & 2), which highlighted the direct effects of moral character on unethical and ethical work behaviors (Cohen et al., 2014). We also described research by a number of other scholars that similarly demonstrate the strong and robust influence of individual differences on ethical and unethical conduct across varied organizational and experimental contexts. In the psychological laboratory, experiments with dictator games, public goods games, prisoner's dilemma games, and other economic tasks consistently find that generous and cooperative choices are reliably predicted by high levels of Honesty-Humility (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009) and guilt proneness (Bracht & Regner, 2013; Pinter et al., 2007). Studies investigating other character traits with different paradigms similarly find reliable effects of

individual differences on helpful and harmful behaviors (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; P. A. Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Moore et al., 2012; O'Boyle et al., 2012; Tangney et al., 2004).

However, the relationship between moral character and unethical behavior goes well beyond simple direct effects. Character influences behaviors in other, more indirect ways as well. This includes situation selection and situation creation. Research on these topics highlight the interdependence between persons and situations—the two are inextricably linked.

5.2. Situation Selection

Most research on unethical behavior treats it as an outcome, focusing on the direct impact that situations and/or personality characteristics have on its occurrence. Sometimes, though, personality influences behavior indirectly by causing people to opt in or opt out of certain environments. This is a basic tenet of "interactionism"—a theoretical perspective that emphasizes the reciprocal relationship and bidirectional causality between persons and situations (Bowers, 1973; Emmons, Diener, & Larsen, 1986).

A compelling demonstration of this idea comes from Carnahan and McFarland's (2007) revisiting of Zimbardo's famous prison study at Stanford. The Stanford prison study is often used to highlight the strong force of situations in leading good people to act in immoral ways (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973; Zimbardo, 2004). An interesting challenge to this interpretation is that the prison study results may have been driven, at least in part, by participant self-selection reliably explained by individual differences in moral character traits (e.g., Machiavellianism, empathy). Evidence for this comes from an experiment that manipulated the recruitment ad that Zimbardo used to solicit participation in the prison study (Carnahan & McFarland, 2007). Ads were placed in various university newspapers to recruit male participants

for either a "psychological study" or a "psychological study of prison life." The latter ad was identical to Zimbardo's original ad, and differed only from the control condition by the "prison life" descriptor. The differences between the men who responded to the prison life ad versus the psychological study (control) ad was striking. The men interested in the prison study were more Machiavellian, aggressive, and narcissistic than those interested in the nondescript psychological study, and they reported lower levels of empathy and altruistic tendencies. Is it any surprise, then, that men predisposed toward aggression and selfishness subsequently acted that way when put in a situation that afforded such behavior?

Zimbardo's guards and prisoners may well have been "ordinary men" (Browning, 1992), but Carnahan and McFarland's (2007) results strongly suggest that they were ordinary men with personalities oriented toward unethical and abusive behavior. Just as an extraverted person is not talkative and socially outgoing in every situation that he or she encounters, the men who played the guards at Stanford were likely not cruel and abusive in their treatment of others unless the situation allowed or encouraged it. But, when the opportunity arose, they sought out such a situation, knowingly or not, that gave them an opportunity to act on their low-moral-character tendencies.

When the interactionist perspective is applied to the study of morality, it suggests that individuals with high levels of moral character will avoid situations that could lead to others being harmed, whereas those with low levels of moral character will be comparatively less reticent to enter into or remain in such situations. Empirical support for this idea comes from a recent set of studies investigating how individual differences in guilt proneness are associated with the avoidance of harmful interdependent relationships (Wiltermuth & Cohen, in press). The basic tenet tested in these studies is that individual differences in moral character—

operationalized as guilt proneness—predict whether people select into or opt out of situations in which they are likely to harm others via their own poor performance on future tasks. One study, for example, asked graduate business students how they would want their operations instructor to determine their final exam grade. Two choices: 1) the final exam grade would depend on the student's own individual performance, or 2) the final exam grade would be based on the average of the student's own individual performance and the performance of a classmate performing exceptionally well in the course, whose grade would likewise be based on this average. Option 2 —the harmful interdependence choice—was selected by less than a third of the MBA students who had reported high levels of guilt proneness earlier in the semester, but was selected by more than half of the MBA students who had reported low levels of guilt proneness. As articulated by Reis (2009), "relationships are situations, and situations involve relationships." Thus, by showing that highly guilt prone people avoid relationships (i.e., situations) in which they would be likely to free-ride on the intellectual contributions of others, Wiltermuth and Cohen's findings highlight the role of moral character in situation selection.

5.3. Situation Creation

The interactionist perspective posits that people not only select situations, but also create and change them (Bowers, 1973; Emmons et al., 1986). Applied to morality, this suggests that moral people experience different situations in their lives as a function of their own good and bad behaviors. CWB, for example, does not occur in a vacuum, but rather in organizations with other employees who are negatively affected by the harmful acts, and who may retaliate in response.

Evidence supporting this view comes from a second paper from our work diary study (Kim et al., 2014). This paper focused on the reciprocal relationship between CWB and bad work environments (i.e., situations in which employees feel mistreated). The research employed a

cross-lagged panel design to analyze the twelve waves of data. Mistreatment was operationalized in a variety of ways in the weekly surveys. These included the extent to which the employee felt he or she had been the recipient of abusive supervision, ostracism, disrespect, and discrimination from coworkers. These mistreatment behaviors are similar in that they all lead employees to feel harmed (i.e., feel that they are the victim of mistreatment).

Neither cross-sectional correlational studies nor experiments can directly test for the existence of bidirectional causal relationships. In contrast, longitudinal studies with cross-lagged panel designs allow researchers to simultaneously compare different directions of causality. By modeling our data with a crossed-lagged panel design, we sought to demonstrate that 1) the situation one faces contributes to the enactment of unethical behaviors, and 2) the unethical behavior one enacts leads to the creation of the situation that one faces. Our results provided support for these claims by showing not only that employees acted more unethically when they had low levels of moral character (i.e., low Honesty-Humility, low Conscientiousness), and when there was a negative work environment (i.e., when they felt they were mistreated by colleagues or supervisors), but also that their unethical behavior (i.e., the CWB they committed) led them to face more negative work environments in the future (i.e., increased mistreatment). Conscientiousness (but not Honesty-Humility) moderated the reciprocal relationship between mistreatment and unethical behavior, such that the more conscientious the employees were, the fewer acts of CWB they committed in response to mistreatment from the prior week (for similar results, see Lian et al., 2014; Nandkeolyar et al., 2014). That is, highly conscientious employees not only acted more ethically at their jobs and experienced less mistreatment from their colleagues as compared to other employees, they also were better at regulating their behavior by inhibiting retaliatory responses to abuse, ostracism, discrimination, and other forms of disrespect.

Unfortunately from a management perspective, this study also revealed that positive organizational practices, such as the enforcement of an ethics code or having fair procedures in the organization, did nothing to reduce CWB and its reciprocal relationship with mistreatment (Kim et al., 2014). Regardless of whether employees perceived that there were fair processes and ethical guidelines where they worked, mistreatment lead to subsequent unethical behavior and unethical behavior lead to subsequent mistreatment (controlling for previous levels of unethical behavior and mistreatment), but not for highly conscientious employees.

Moral character, then, facilitates the creation of better work environments by inhibiting the factors that can pressure people into engaging in bad behavior. By acting ethically, and by not responding in kind to harmful treatment from others, individuals who have strong self-regulatory abilities improve the overall ethical climates and cultures of the organizations where they work, which ultimately benefits them as well as their colleagues. Employees who are inconsiderate of others and who have poor self-control not only face more negative work environments themselves, but also create environments that bring out the worst in everyone around them. It is a scary thought indeed to think of what can happen when employees with low levels of moral character come to dominate the environments where they work—everyone suffers as a result.

6. Character Development

An obvious implication of the research reviewed in this essay is that individuals low in moral character should be avoided in organizations and other social settings, lest one be cheated, defrauded, or betrayed by them. Selection is, of course, one means for mitigating unethical behavior by low moral character employees, but it is not the only management strategy for dealing with these individuals. Moral character, like all aspects of personality, can change over

time and across situations. Targeted interventions could focus on strengthening the moral character of employees, treating character as a competency that can be improved through training (Crossan, Mazutis, Seijts, et al., 2013). What might such interventions look like? Based on our tripartite model, we suggest that character development interventions focus on fostering employees' consideration of others, improving employees' self-regulatory abilities, and making morality more central to employees' identities.

Consideration of others could be promoted in organizations by adapting techniques used to encourage empathy and peace in tense environments involving intergroup conflict (Aronson & Patnoe, 1997; Cohen & Insko, 2008; Malhotra & Liyanage, 2005; Stephan & Finlay, 1999; Wolf et al., 2009). Such interventions could prompt employees to think about short-term and long-term consequences their choices could have on others, thereby helping workers become more attuned to how they affect those around them. Furthermore, these interventions could encourage perspective taking and recognition of superordinate goals that members of their organization share, thereby facilitating the development of empathy and trust among employees.

Employees' self-regulatory abilities could be improved by prompting employees to think about the consequences of their choices for their future selves. A variety of methods have been used to foster such consideration in psychological experiments (Hershfield et al., 2012; van Gelder, Hershfield, & Nordgren, 2013; Wolf et al., 2009). For example, one such intervention involves having individuals write a letter to their future self in 20 years' time (van Gelder et al., 2013). An experiment that compared this letter-writing activity to a control condition where participants wrote a letter to themselves 3 months in the future found that those in the 20-year condition were comparatively less likely to endorse delinquent choices in a subsequent decision making task. We assume that writing a letter to one's self in 20 years helps people recognize the

long-term consequences of their behavior, and as such, helps with self-regulation. Psychological interventions such as these could be adapted for use in organizations to train employees to balance their short-term self-interest with their long-term goals.

A different avenue for helping employees develop better self-regulatory abilities could be to focus on improving their sleep schedule. Sleep deprivation is a known inhibitor of self-control and is associated with unethical conduct in organizations (Barnes, Schaubroeck, Huth, & Ghumman, 2011). Thus, we might predict that interventions that boost the quantity and quality of employees' sleep would strengthen their moral character by increasing their capacity to self-regulate, thereby producing concomitant changes in their ethical behavior.

With regard to moral identity, subtle linguistic cues could be used in organizations to activate employees' moral identities and possibly increase the centrality of morality to their identities over time (Bryan, Adams, & Monin, 2013; Bryan, Master, & Walton, 2014). Bryan and colleagues (2013) found that people were less likely to lie for monetary gain in a psychological experiment when the experimenter said, "Please don't be a cheater" rather than "Please don't cheat." In a related experiment, children who were three to six years old were more likely to help an experimenter clean up toys and books when the experimenter said, "You could be a helper" rather than "You could help" (Bryan et al., 2014). By invoking people's desire to see themselves as good and not bad, these statements strengthen the relationship between moral identity and moral behavior. Presumably, the repeated use of such language in organizations could cause these associations to become internalized and chronically active, even when linguistic primes are absent.

An interesting extension of this work might be to investigate how organizations can strengthen positive identities among employees through awards or other forms of company

recognition. Winning an "employee of the month" award, for example, could make the identity of "good employee" more central to the recipient's self-concept. Extending this idea, one might imagine that winning an "integrity award" could make the identity of "ethical employee" more central to the recipient's self-concept. Presumably, being publically recognized as a person who acts with integrity would strengthen an employee's moral identity, and thereby increase his or her moral character.

7. Conclusions

Contrary to outdated notions of situational influences overpowering personality influences in people's everyday lives, the research we reviewed in this essay indicates that the impact of moral character on ethical and unethical behavior is substantial and consequential. This has important implications for theory and practice in organizational behavior. Scholars and practitioners need to be aware of the damage employees with low moral character can do, and great efforts should be taken to avoid selecting and promoting these individuals, especially for leadership positions where they could have an undue influence on those around them and the organization more generally. By raising awareness of the harm low moral character employees inflict on those around them and the organizations where they work, we hope our work sparks future research that furthers our understanding of how unethical conduct in organizations can be managed and prevented. Until recently, little scholarly attention was paid to personality influences on moral behavior, so we are encouraged by the recent changing of the tides, and look forward to continued growth in this area.

A perennial methodological challenge that researchers of moral character face is how to measure it. Do self-reports of personality paint an accurate picture of a person's character? Are observer reports more accurate? And, which of these methods has more validity when it comes to

predicting unethical behaviors in organizations? Although we, and others, have attempted to address these questions in prior work (e.g., Cohen, Panter, Turan, et al., 2013), the answers thus far remain elusive. The one thing that is clear is that more theoretical development and empirical data are needed to understand how to best determine a person's moral character and their likelihood of behaving unethically. We hope psychologists and organizational behavior scholars take up this challenge.

While much of this essay highlighted the empirical support for person factors in causing bad and good behaviors, we appreciate that persons and situations cannot truly be disentangled. Arguments about the person versus the situation largely fall apart when we recognize their reciprocal relationship. The environments that lead to unethical behavior in organizations, such as interpersonal conflict and abusive supervision, are often directly caused by employees low in moral character. Moreover, social contagion and slippery slope models of unethical conduct highlight how negative environments can cause employees to lose sight of their moral compass (Moore & Gino, 2013). Over time, it is likely that corresponding decrements in moral character would result.

Although recent longitudinal studies are beginning to explore the temporal complexity between persons, situations, and behaviors (Kim et al., 2014; Meier & Spector, 2013), there is still much work to be done. It is no doubt the case that causal arrows flow in a multitude of directions when it comes to modeling the dynamic and interactive relationships between moral character, organizational behavior, and the environment in which such behavior occurs. Theoretical and statistical models necessarily require parsimony when studying these relationships, but in reality, changes in one component lead to changes in the others. Accordingly, we think the most important questions to be addressed by future research are how

moral character and situations work in conjunction to determine consequential life outcomes, and how character, context, and behavior dynamically influence each over time.

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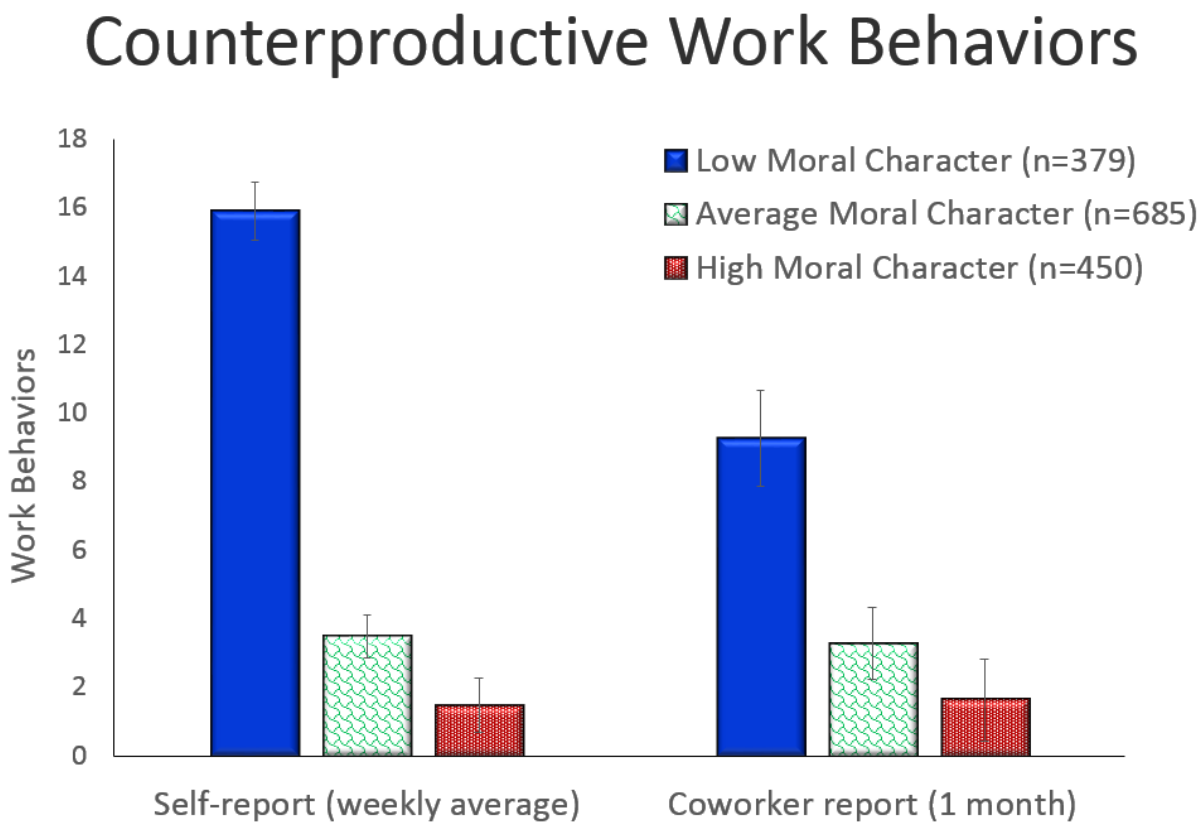

Figure 1. Frequency of counterproductive work behaviors (CWB) as indicated by employees' self-reports (average of 12 weekly reports) and observations from coworkers (one report after a period of a month), as described in Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, and Kim (2014; the figure shows combined data from studies 1 and 2). Error bars indicate 1 standard error above and below the sample mean. CWB were measured with the 32-item CWB checklist (Spector et al., 2006).

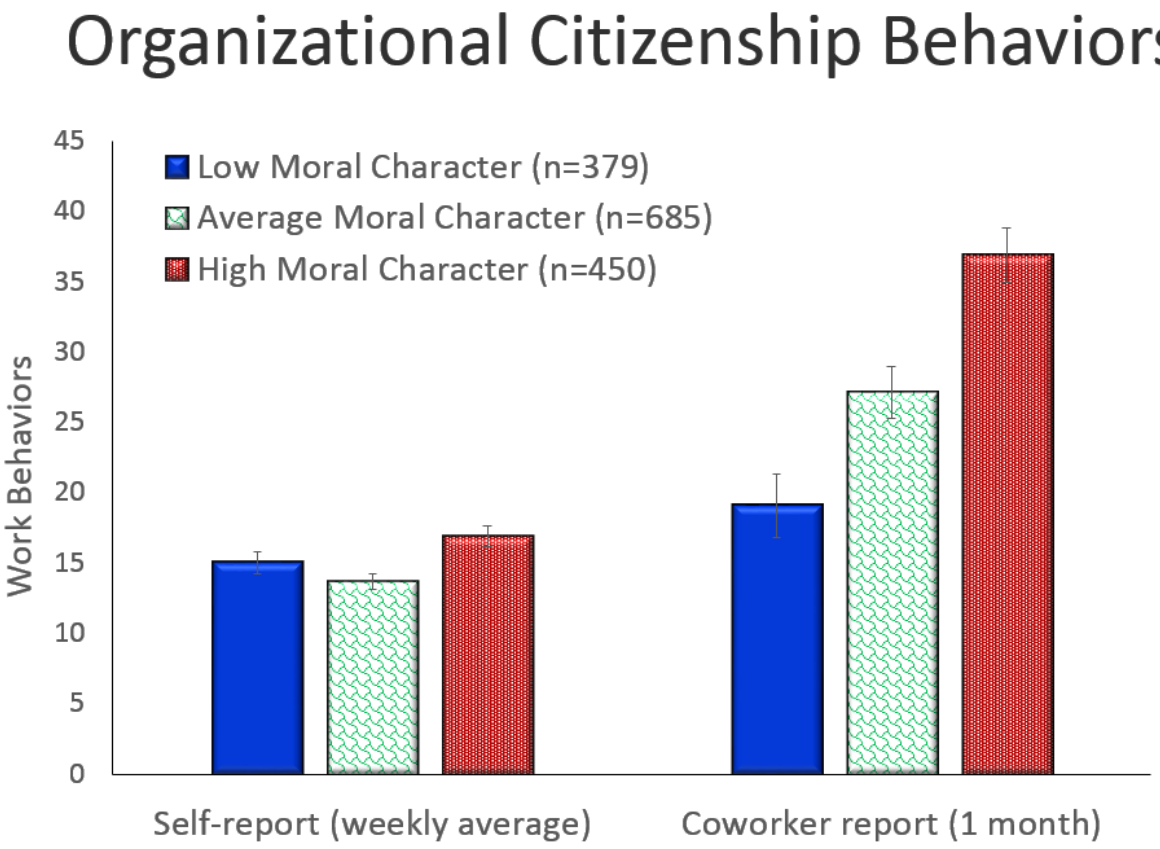

Figure 2. Frequency of organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) as indicated by employees' self-reports (average of 12 weekly reports) and observations from coworkers (one report after a period of a month), as described in Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, and Kim (2014*;* the figure shows combined data from studies 1 and 2). Error bars indicate 1 standard error above and below the sample mean. OCB were measured with the 20-item OCB checklist (Fox et al., 2012).

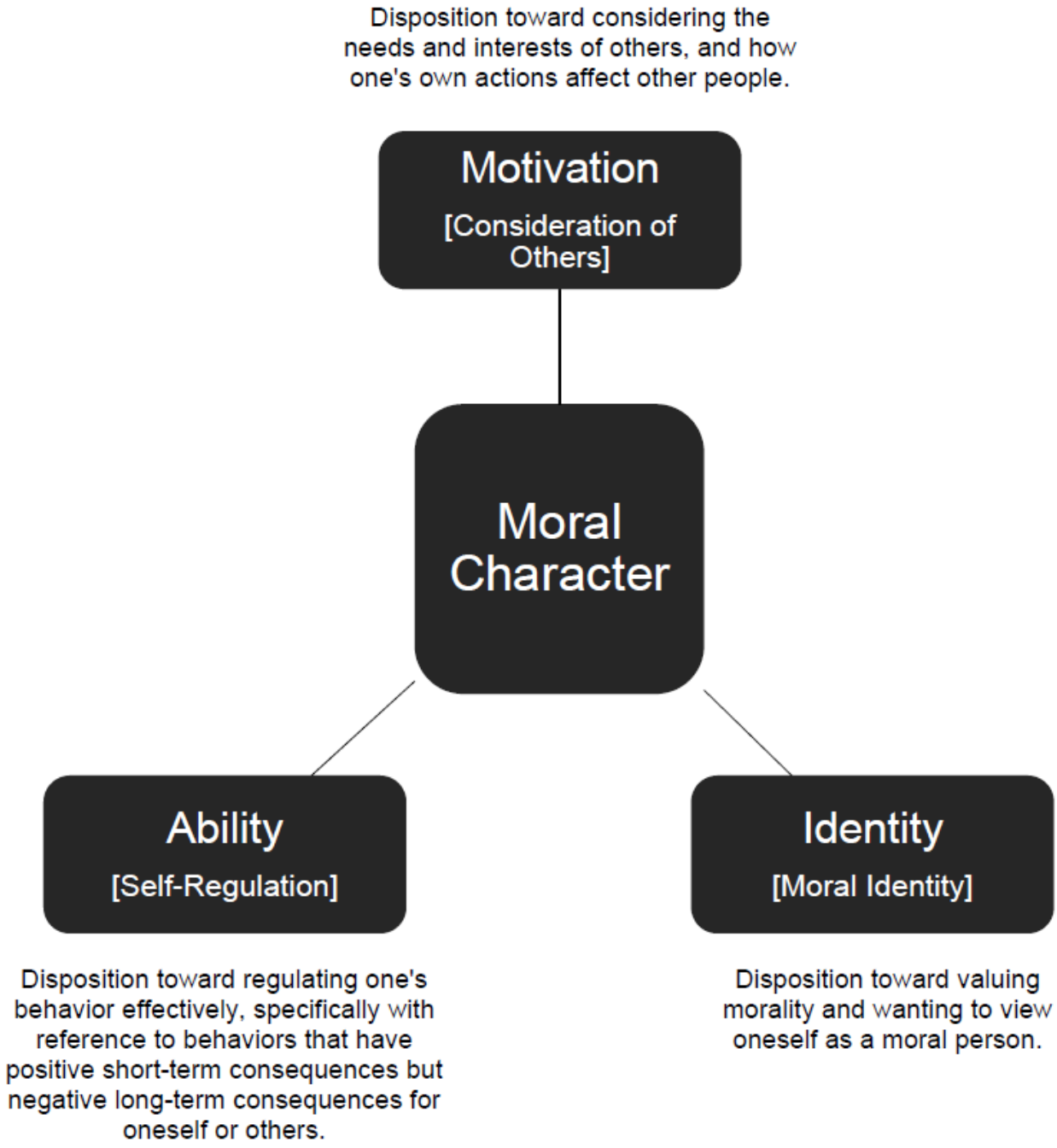

Figure 3. Tripartite Theoretical Framework of Moral Character