Children's Obligatory and Discretionary Moral Judgments

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KAHN, PETER H., JR. *Children's Obligatory and Discretionary Moral Judgments.* CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 1992, **63**, 416–430. This study examined children's obligatory moral judgments (which reflect a moral requirement) and discretionary moral judgments (which reflect moral worthiness, but not a requirement). 72 children participated across grades 2, 5, and 8 (mean ages, 8-3, 11-0, and 13-11). Children were interviewed in response to stimulus stories that controlled for the degree of agent's cost (low and high) for performing positive moral acts (giving money for food to an impoverished, hungry person) and negative moral acts (not stealing money for food). Results showed that negative moral acts were more often conceived as obligatory than positive moral acts. In addition, the results support the proposition that children's concepts of obligation underlie judgments to codify law, that justice reasoning builds on concepts of welfare, and that with increasing age discretionary moral reasoning incorporates such character traits as benevolence, sacrifice, and supererogation. Discussion includes consideration of how the study's conceptualization and analysis can provide guidance to a moral-developmental research program.

In recent years the moral developmental field has offered alternative perspectives to those based largely on justice. These perspectives have focused on such constructs as care (Gilligan, 1982; Lyons, 1983), virtue (Ryan, 1989; Wynne, 1986), altruism (Grusec, 1982; Hoffman, 1981), and prosocial reasoning (Eisenberg, 1982; Eisenberg-Berg, 1979). While these perspectives have provided richness to a characterization of the moral life, two questions can be posed. The first question arises from increasing indications that such alternative constructs are not unrelated to justice. For example, Boyd (1989) provides clear suggestions for how a view of principled justice as conceived by Kohlberg incorporates aspects of both care and virtuous character. Thus the first question concerns how to investigate morality broadly enough to be sensitive to the richness in the moral life by taking seriously diversity of moral constructs (cf. Baumrind, 1986; Thorkildsen, 1989), yet precisely enough to delineate the relations between the constructs when they occur.

The second question concerns whether, and if so why, different moral constructs are more germane to positive or negative moral situations. Positive moral situations refer to the "do's" of the moral life (e.g., practice charity), and negative moral situations to the "do not's" (e.g., do not steal). Consider an intuitive example. As a society, we give awards to recognize the virtue of individuals who perform heroic acts, such as risking one's life to save another, yet we do not (at least normally) give awards to individuals who simply go 10 or 50 years without murdering another. One possible explanation for this asymmetry is that concepts of virtue apply more readily to positive acts, while concepts of justice apply to negative acts. Indeed, in the literature something of this distinction can be found, for while concepts of justice have clearly been shown to help

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structure thinking about issues that involve negative acts of stealing (Arsenio & Ford, 1985; Hollos, Leis, & Turiel, 1986; Kohlberg, 1969, 1984; Nucci, 1986; Smetana, 1981) or intentionally causing harm to other individuals (Davidson, Turiel, & Black, 1983; Nucci, 1981, 1986; Nucci & Nucci, 1982; Tisak & Turiel, 1984), there is reason to believe that justice serves less well in understanding positive acts (see Nunner-Winkler, 1984), particularly those that involve some sense of supererogation (Eisenberg, 1989; Eisenberg-Berg, 1979; Eisenberg-Berg & Neal, 1978; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & Brady-Smity, 1977).

The present study addresses both of the above questions—that concern diversity of moral constructs and range of construct application across positive and negative moral acts—by distinguishing initially between obligatory and discretionary moral judgments. Following philosophical theory (Gewirth, 1978; Rawls, 1971) and psychological research (Kohlberg, 1971; Turiel, 1983), obligatory judgments are generalizable requirements that are not contingent on societal rules or laws. In turn, the term "discretionary" follows Williams's (1985) view that there may be actions that are "heroic or very fine actions, which go beyond what is obligatory or demanded. Or there may be actions that from a ethical point of view it would be agreeable or worthwhile or a good idea to do, without one's being required to do them" (p. 179). Thus discretionary moral judgments are those where moral action, while not required of an agent, is nevertheless conceived of as morally worthy based on concerns of human welfare or virtue (see also Fishkin, 1982; Hunt, 1987; Urmson, 1958).

Drawing on this distinction, this study examined relations between children's obligatory and discretionary moral judgments in the context of positive and negative acts, where in each context the cost to the agent for performing the moral act was systematically manipulated. In the study, children were presented with three brief stories. Two of the stories entailed positive morality, where moral action entails giving money for food to an impoverished, hungry person. The third story entailed negative morality, where moral action entails not stealing money for food. In turn, each story involved two conditions that differed on the degree of personal cost—low or high cost—incurred for performing the moral act. Thus the Low Cost condition was weighted toward an obligatory orientation and the High Cost condition toward a discretionary orientation.

Four major issues were examined. The first issue concerned the relative stringency of children's conceptions of positive and negative morality, where by stringency is meant a property of a moral view being very demanding within its area of application (Scheffler, 1986). It was expected that conceptions of positive morality would be less stringently held than conceptions of negative morality, as reflected in the following findings: Children would less often judge positive than negative acts as obligatory when the acts entailed minimal cost to the agent, and children would less often maintain their obligatory judgments about positive than negative acts when the cost to the agent was substantially increased. The second issue concerned the reasons children use to justify their obligatory and discretionary judgments. It was expected that the justification data would provide some specificity on structural relations between the constructs of welfare, justice, and virtue. The third issue drew on a distinction made as early as Aristotle in *Nichomachean Ethics* between just action and just character (see also Louden, 1984) and concerned children's understanding of praise. It was expected that younger children would more often focus on praising the act, while older children would more often use the act to assess whether to praise the actor's character. In addition, given that praise, as noted above, is often associated with acts "which go beyond what is obligatory or demanded" (Williams, 1985, p. 179), it was expected that children of all ages would more often accord greater praise for acts they conceived as discretionary than obligatory. The final issue concerned the relation between moral and legal judgments. In previous domain-specific research that has used stimuli that establish negative obligations, evidence supports the proposition that children's moral judgments do not depend on legal authority. For example, research shows that children judge it wrong to hurt other people unnecessarily regardless of whether or not a law prohibits the act (Turiel, 1983) or an adult commands the child to perform the act (Laupa & Turiel, 1986). Extending this research, this study examined the question of whether children advocate laws that promote morality in positive and negative situations, and if such judgments are related to concepts of obligation.

Method

Subjects.—Seventy-two subjects participated in this study. There were 24 children (12 males and 12 females) in each of three grade levels: second, fifth, and eighth (mean ages 8-3, 11-0, and 13-11). The children, of mixed ethnicity, were selected from three schools in largely working-class neighborhoods in the surrounding San Francisco Bay area.

Procedures and measures.—Each child was individually administered a semistructured interview that lasted approximately 45 min. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The interview stimuli for every child consisted of three one-paragraph stories. Two stories entailed positive morality situations, and one story a negative morality situation. In addition, each story contained two conditions. One condition entailed low cost to the agent for performing the moral act, and the second condition entailed high cost.

The first story (for future reference called Lunch Story) portrays as the protagonist a student, who (as in all three stories) is the same age as the subject, on his way to school with a week's worth of lunch money, $5.00. On the way, he meets a poor woman and her four children who have not eaten in a day or two. In the Low Cost condition, the poor woman asks the protagonist for 20 cents so they could get a bit of food. In the High Cost condition, the poor woman asks the protagonist for the entire $5.00. In the second story (for future reference called Raffle Story), the protagonist wins $100.00 in a raffle contest. The protagonist and his older sister go to the contest office to pick up the money. On the way home, they meet (as in the Lunch Story) a poor woman and her four children who have not eaten for a day or two. In the Low Cost condition, the poor woman asks the protagonist for $1.00 to buy some food. In the High Cost condition, the woman asks the protagonist for the entire $100.00. In the third story (for future reference called Stealing Story) the Low Cost condition portrays a middle-class mother and her four children who go grocery shopping one morning. The mother buys groceries but forgets to bring enough money to buy fruit juice to include in her children's afternoon snack. Upon leaving the store, the mother sees a child counting his lunch money on the way to school. The mother quickly runs up and takes the child's lunch money so as to be able to buy her children the snack food. In the High Cost condition, a mother and her four children are very poor and hungry and have not eaten in a day or two (comparable to the mother and four children in the positive morality stories). The mother is on the street and, as in the previous Low Cost condition, sees the child counting his lunch money on the way to school. The mother runs up to the child and takes his lunch money so as to be able to buy herself and her children some food.

Thus the main difference between the two positive stories is that in the lunch story the agent's cost is in terms of physical welfare (food for lunch), while in the raffle story the agent's cost is in terms of nonessential material welfare (extra money won in a raffle contest that would likely be used to buy special items like a bicycle or extra clothes). It was expected that the two stories, on the whole, would act as repeated measures on the basis of evaluations and supporting justifications. A repeated measure for the stealing story was deemed less necessary given that the stimulus in the Low Cost condition resembles stimuli used in a good deal of other research (e.g., Davidson et al., 1983; Nucci, 1981; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987; Smetana, 1988; Tisak & Turiel, 1984), and in the High Cost condition resembles stimulus used by Tisak and Ford (1986).

Within each story, the Low Cost condition is weighted toward establishing moral obligation. For the positive stories, the potential obligation is to provide minimal help to other people in need when the personal cost to provide such help is insignificant. For the negative story, the potential obligation is to refrain from stealing when the personal cost not to steal is insignificant. In turn, within each story the High Cost condition increases the personal cost for performing the moral act. In the Lunch Story, the increased cost is in terms of hunger (a child goes without lunch for one week), in the Raffle Story, in terms of personal resources (a child forfeits the opportunity that a hundred dollars affords), and in the Stealing Story, similar to the Lunch Story, in terms of hunger (a family that borders on starvation continues to go without food).

The degree of agent's cost in the High Cost condition of the negative story was purposely made greater than in the corresponding condition in the positive stories so as to provide a more compelling test of the hypothesis that negative acts are more stringently conceived than positive acts. In addi-

tion, two points should be noted. First there is every reason to believe that cost for performing a negative moral act (e.g., an agent's cost for not stealing) is a sensible idea. Philosophically, such cost analyses are central to consequentialist theory (McGuire, 1985). Psychologically, costs for performing a negative moral act have been successfully though implicitly embedded in many of Kohlberg's dilemmas: For example, had Heinz or Valjean adequate savings, the cost for not stealing would have been much less, and presumably the justifications for stealing so diminishes. Second, there is little reason to believe that negative and positive costs are confounded. For the goal was not to generate identical costs across both positive and negative acts (which may well be impossible) but to understand how children understand such costs in the different contexts.

The three stories were counterbalanced based on all six permutations within each subgroup of age by gender. The Low Cost condition always preceded the High Cost condition. After presentation of each story, children were asked questions to determine their comprehension. All but one of the youngest children (subsequently dropped from the study and replaced) comprehended each of the stories.

After each story and in each condition, children were posed a series of questions pertaining to the issues under study. First, children were asked whether they thought the protagonist should perform the act in question (e.g., "Should Tom give the woman the 20 cents?"). Then children were asked whether it would be permissible not to perform the act (e.g., "Would it be all right if Tom doesn't give the woman any money?"). This further assessment was believed important given that "should" judgments by themselves do not necessarily reflect moral obligation (e.g., see Kohlberg's, 1971, analysis of the statement "Martinis should be made five-to-one"). To complete the assessment of an obligatory judgment, children were asked whether their permissibility judgment generalized ("Let's say people in X [a city named by the subject that was thought to be far away that they had never been to] in a similar situation would not give the 20 cents; is that all right or not all right?"). To assess praiseworthiness, children were asked whether the protagonist should be praised for performing the act (e.g., "If Tom did give the woman the 20 cents, is this something that should be talked about as something really good that somebody did, a little good, or nothing special at all?"). For this assessment, often the idea of praise was explicitly introduced into the probes (e.g., "Do you know what praise means? What?") so as to help direct the meaning of the original question. Finally, to assess relations between legal and obligatory judgments, children were asked if they advocated legal codification of the act in question (e.g., "In our city, should there be a law that says in this situation you have to give the woman the 20 cents?"). For all their evaluative judgments regarding should and permissibility, children were probed for their reasons, and often asked to reconcile their justifications with other positions they may have taken in potential contradiction, or positions that other children provided that offered a contrary viewpoint.

Coding and reliability.—A coding manual was first formulated from the responses of 50% of the children, a total of 36 children, with 12 from each age group. The coding manual was then applied to the responses from the other 50% of the children. The results from both groups were combined for analyses. Two types of responses were coded. The evaluative responses were coded for content choices as determined by type of question (e.g., should/should not, all right/not all right). The justifications for the evaluative questions were scored with a coding system adapted from Davidson et al. (1983) and Kahn and Turiel (1988). Summary descriptions on the most general level of the justification coding system are presented in Table 1.

An independent scorer trained in the use of the coding manual recoded 18 interviews (25%), three randomly chosen from each of six groups comprised by grade and gender. In total, 540 evaluations and 397 justifications were recoded. For evaluations, intercoder agreement was 97%. For justifications as reported in Table 1, intercoder agreement was 81%.

Results

Nonparametric statistics were used to test for effects across conditions and for effects of gender and age on both evaluations and justifications. Given that this study sought largely to extend rather than confirm previous research, adequate attention was paid to the problem of Type II errors (false negatives) along with Type I errors by conducting each test at the .05 level (see Huberty, 1987; cf. Marascuilo, Omelich, &

TABLE 1

SUMMARY OF JUSTIFICATION CATEGORIES AND ILLUSTRATIVE RESPONSES

Category	Description
Other's welfare	Appeal to the physical, material, or psychological welfare of others ("Because she has four kids who haven't eaten for a while").
Agent's welfare	Appeal to the physical, material, or psychological welfare of the agent ("Because you need three meals a day to get all the vitamins and food you need").
Welfare in compensation	Appeal wherein the physical, material, or psychological welfare of other and agent are balanced with one another ("Because he would still have something for breakfast and dinner and the lady would still have all of the money to buy food"), including appeals to reversibility of roles ("If that ever happened to me, I'd like someone to do that for me").
Mitigating welfare circumstances	Appeal to an interpretation whereby the initial welfare claim is deflected based on ineffective methods ("Because with twenty cents you can't buy much food, so if he didn't give her twenty cents, it wouldn't be a big loss"), already having provided welfare ("Because even just giving her what he gave her, that's still good, because it shows that he'd be willing to help out the people that are less fortunate"), not legitimate welfare needs ("Why should we give the dollar to the woman?—she has survived so far"), and alternative welfare solutions ("No matter how bad off you are, there are places that you can get help").
Justice	Appeal to rights and fairness, potentially in the context of notions of equilibrium between individuals' competing claims ("That doesn't give her the right to take it away. Because she had hers, that's hers, that's his, that's the plain fact"), as well as appeals to ownership ("Because it's her money") and merit ("She earned it; she went to the trouble to enter the raffle and everything").
Mitigating justice circumstances	Appeal to an interpretation whereby the initial justice claim is deflected based on the locus of responsibility ("Because Mary, she's one person, and the lady with the four children is another. It's the lady with the four children's problem to get the children and herself food, it's not Mary's").
Personal	Appeal to individual preferences or prerogatives ("It's the own person's decision"), individual nonessential interests ("Because there are things that you might want to do with the money, whether you need it really or not"), and desirable opportunities to the agent ("Because it's your luck, you should take advantage of it, because it's like a chance in a lifetime").
Agent-centered	Appeal that is centered around often long-term personal characteristics, including unelaborated virtue and vice ("Because then she'd be selfish and greedy"), benevolence ("Because you're helping out someone who is really in desperate need of it"), sacrifice ("Because he went without something so that someone else could have food"), and supererogation ("Because it was like above and beyond. She didn't have to do it, but she did").
Authority	Appeal to the existence of an authority or authority's power ("Nobody's gonna make him") or formal rule or law ("It's against the law"; "It's one of the ten commandments").
Unelaborated	Appeal to the act or some of its features ("Because it's not a big thing"), including reference to act appropriateness or inappropriateness ("It's not a very nice thing to do").

NOTE.—Sample responses are in parentheses.

Gokhale, 1988; and Baumrind, 1986, and Walker's, 1986, rejoinder).

Act evaluations.—As discussed earlier, obligatory judgments were assessed by affirmative evaluations for the three questions reported in Table 2 (should; not all right not to, locally; not all right not to, elsewhere). Accordingly, the number of children were tallied who each provided affirmative evaluations to all three questions. These numbers are reported at the bottom of Table 2 (obligation evaluation). Two results were found, both of which bear on the issue of the relative stringency of children's conceptions of positive and negative morality.

First, in the Low Cost condition, children less often affirmed the two positive obligations than in the negative obligation: 42% of the children conceived of giving the lunch money as obligatory, and 40% in the Raffle Story, while 100% of the children conceived of not stealing the lunch money as obligatory. McNemar tests for the three pairwise analyses resulted in two significant comparisons: Lunch Story versus Stealing Story, $\chi^2_M = 36.03$, $p < .001$; Raffle Story versus Stealing Story, $\chi^2_M = 39.02$, $p < .001$.

The second central finding shows that of the children who conceived of the act in the Low Cost condition as obligatory, the large majority in the positive stories but not negative story changed, with increasing costs, to a discretionary judgment. In the Lunch Story, 96% of the children changed from obligatory to discretionary; in the Raffle Story, 91% changed; and in the Stealing Story, 15% changed. These results were statistically analyzed by comparing the percentage of changed judgments from obligatory to discretionary on a pairwise basis between stories. For the comparison between the Lunch Story and Stealing Story, $\chi^2_M = 14.06$, $p < .001$; between the Raffle Story and Stealing Story, $\chi^2_M = 13.07$, $p < .001$; between the Raffle Story and Lunch Story there was literally no change at all.

Act justifications.—Children's justifications for their act evaluations regarding whether the act should be performed and whether it was all right not to perform the act locally were coded with the categories reported in Table 1. Tests for effects of gender and age were conducted on each category used by at least 10% of the children. Of the 48 Fischer exact tests for effect of gender, none was significant. Thus results were collapsed by gender. The resulting percentages are reported in Table 3 and show patterns for frequency of justification use. Most notably, depending on the situational context comprised of degree of agent's cost and type of act, children as a group often provided either welfare justifications, justice justifications, or both.

For age differences, the analysis usually tested for a linear trend across second, fifth, and eighth grade (Kendall's tau *c*). In a few cases, however, one or more of the cell sizes was too small (less than 5) to meet the assumptions of the test. In these cases, two of the grades were collapsed, second and fifth, or fifth and eighth, depending on and using

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN BY STORY AND CONDITION[a] WHO SAID ACT SHOULD BE PERFORMED, WAS NOT ALL RIGHT NOT TO PERFORM (Both Locally and Elsewhere), AND, COMBINING ALL THREE CRITERIA, WAS OBLIGATORY

	Give Lunch Money		Give Raffle Money		Not Steal Lunch Money	
Evaluation	LC	HC	LC	HC	LC	HC
Should	100	6	100	10	100	86
Not all right not to (locally)	41	1	42	3	100	94
Not all right not to (elsewhere)	46	1	42	3	100	95
Obligatory	42	1	40	3	100	87

NOTE.—(1) In reading the table, the triple negatives "not all right not to not steal lunch money" reduce to "not all right to steal lunch money." This confusion is tolerated so as to highlight the symmetry of each potential moral obligation: to give lunch money, to give raffle money, and not to steal lunch money. (2) In the Low Cost condition for the Lunch Story, 1% more of the children viewed the situation as obligatory than locally not all right. This apparently logical inconsistency can occur simply because the group of children coded for obligation comprises, due to missing values, a slightly smaller subset of children for any individual evaluation alone.

[a] LC = Low Cost; HC = High Cost.

TABLE 3

PERCENTAGE OF JUSTIFICATIONS BY CONDITION, ACT EVALUATION, AND ACT[a]

	LOW COST CONDITION									HIGH COST CONDITION											
	Should			Not All Right Not To (Local)			All Right Not To (Local)			Should			Not All Right Not To (Local)			Should Not			All Right Not To (Local)		
JUSTIFICATIONS	L	R	S	L	R	S	L	R	S	L	R	S	L	R	S	L	R	S	L	R	S
Other's welfare	37	42	25	53	24	31	0	0	–	–	–	21	–	–	25	3	0	–	0	0	–
Agent's welfare	23	23	4	13	21	0	23	13	–	–	–	3	–	–	4	74	29	–	39	29	–
Welfare in compensation	31	26	6	16	21	2	0	0	–	–	–	1	–	–	0	5	4	–	10	3	–
Mitigating welfare circumstances	1	0	20	0	0	24	9	7	–	–	–	11	–	–	13	5	5	–	16	12	–
Justice	0	4	31	0	6	33	52	67	–	–	–	44	–	–	35	8	34	–	16	29	–
Mitigating justice circumstances	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	2	–	–	–	0	–	–	0	1	10	–	3	3	–
Agent-centered	5	3	1	13	21	0	2	0	–	–	–	0	–	–	2	0	0	–	0	0	–
Personal	0	1	0	0	0	0	11	9	–	–	–	0	–	–	0	1	18	–	10	21	–
Authority	0	0	10	3	3	7	0	0	–	–	–	4	–	–	4	0	0	–	6	0	–
Unelaborated	2	0	1	0	6	2	0	0	–	–	–	15	–	–	17	1	0	–	0	3	–

NOTE.—(1) Justifications are not reported in those cases where less than 15% of the children provided a particular evaluation across all three stories. (–) denotes situations where within an act evaluation less than 15% of the subjects provided a specific evaluation. (2) Some subjects provided multiple justifications. All justifications were coded for each subject. (3) Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

[a] L = to give lunch money, R = to give raffle money, S = not to steal.

the strongest relation. The resulting contingency table was then analyzed with Fischer's exact test. Seventeen tests were significant and are listed in Table 4. Patterns emerged. Younger children emphasized other's welfare, agent's welfare, and mitigating welfare circumstances. In contrast, older children emphasized welfare in compensation, justice, agent-centered, agent's welfare, mitigating justice circumstances, and personal.

Praiseworthy evaluations.—For both positive stories in both conditions, results showed that over 90% of the children considered it praiseworthy for the protagonist to give the family the money: Lunch Story, Low Cost condition (93%), High Cost condition (91%); Raffle Story, Low Cost condition (93%), High Cost condition (94%). A similar pattern held across all four positive conditions when examining the four subsets of children who viewed each of the positive acts as discretionary: Lunch Story, Low Cost condition (91%), High Cost condition (94%); Raffle Story, Low Cost condition (93%), High Cost condition (97%). In the negative story, 52% of the children considered it praiseworthy for the protagonist not to steal the money in the Low Cost condition, and 78% in the High Cost condition. (Since so few children viewed the negative acts as discretionary, a comparable analysis for these two subsets of children was unnecessary.)

A more detailed analysis was conducted on the basis of coding two levels of praiseworthiness—moderate praise (a "little good" or "good" response) and strong praise ("really good"). Based on this distinction, relations between conceptions of praiseworthiness and obligation were examined through conducting two types of within-subjects analyses. For the first analysis, only those children who for a single story viewed the Low Cost condition as obligatory and the High Cost condition as discretionary were considered. The goal was to ascertain whether children increased the degree of their praiseworthy evaluations when moving from an obligatory to discretionary judgment. Because there were so few discretionary judgments for the High Cost condition in the negative story, only tests for the two positive stories were conducted. Both tests were significant. For the Lunch Story (n = 27), $\chi^2_M = 7.58$, $p < .01$; for the Raffle Story (n = 27), $\chi^2_M = 8.45$, $p < .005$.

For the second within-subjects analysis, only those children who viewed both positive and negative stories as obligatory in the Low Cost condition were considered. The goal was to ascertain whether children who provided praiseworthy evaluations in the Low Cost condition in the positive stories changed to nonpraiseworthy evaluations in the negative story. Tests were significant for both comparisons. Comparing the Lunch to Stealing Story (n = 27), $\chi^2_M = 9.09$, $p < .005$; similarly, comparing the Raffle to Stealing Story (n = 27), $\chi^2_M = 9.09$, $p < .005$.

Praiseworthy justifications.—Children's justifications for their praiseworthy evaluations were coded with the categories in Table 1. As can be noted from Table 1, the majority of justification categories are act-centered, meaning they justify the rightness or wrongness of acts, and include such appeals as agent's welfare, other's welfare, justice, and personal choice. In contrast, one of the justification categories is called agent-centered where there is an appeal to (often long-term) personal characteristics of the agent, including unelaborated virtue, generosity, sacrifice, and supererogation. In other words, act-centered justifications emphasize the rightness or wrongness of acts, and, in terms of praise, praise the act. In contrast, agent-centered justifications emphasize the goodness or badness of the individual performer of acts, and, in terms of praise, praise the actor. An analysis was conducted on the basis of this distinction. Multiple justifications were eliminated by coding agent-centered instead of act-centered justifications whenever both were used, since references to acts were often integrated into agent-centered reasoning, and the goal was to be sensitive to what was hypothesized to be a more mature form of reasoning (cf. Damon [1977, pp. 89–90] for a similar method of coding). Effects for gender were tested and found in only one comparison, noted below.

Based on this coding method, justifications in response to children's praiseworthy evaluations were initially tallied for the children who viewed the positive act as discretionary. Results showed that this subset of children provided primarily welfare and agent-centered justifications. Lunch Story, Low Cost condition (n = 39), 31% welfare, 67% agent-centered; Lunch Story, High Cost condition (n = 64), 19% welfare, 77% agent-centered; Raffle Story, Low Cost condition (n = 41), 33% welfare, 62% agent-centered; Raffle Story, High Cost condition (n = 66), 14% welfare, 71% agent-centered.

TABLE 4

AGE EFFECTS WITHIN JUSTIFICATIONS USED TO SUPPORT ACT EVALUATIONS
(to Give Lunch Money, to Give Raffle Money, Not to Steal Lunch Money)

Justification	Story	Condition	Evaluation	Direction of Change	Grade Comparison	*P* value
Other's welfare	Lunch	Low Cost	Should	−	2d (71%) to 5th (37%) to 8th (25%)	$p < .001$
Other's welfare	Raffle	Low Cost	Should	−	2d (83%) to 5th (50%) to 8th (25%)	$p < .0001$
Other's welfare	Stealing	Low Cost	Should	−	2d (71%) to 5th (46%) to 8th (25%)	$p < .002$
Other's welfare	Lunch	Low Cost	Not all right not to	−	2d (73%) and 5th (78%) combined to 8th (11%)	$p < .003$
Other's welfare	Raffle	Low Cost	Not all right not to	−	2d (56%) and 5th (33%) combined to 8th (0%)	$p < .01$
Agent's welfare	Lunch	Low Cost	Should	+	2d (17%) to 5th (21%) to 8th (46%)	$p < .03$
Agent's welfare	Raffle	High Cost	Should not	−	2d (52%) to 5th (32%) to 8th (14%)	$p < .009$
Welfare in compensation	Lunch	Low Cost	Should	+	2d (21%) to 5th (37%) to 8th (54%)	$p < .02$
Welfare in compensation	Raffle	Low Cost	Should	+	2d (4%) to 5th (33%) to 8th (58%)	$p < .0001$

Mitigating welfare circumstances	Stealing	Low Cost	Not all right not to	−	2d (21%) and 5th (25%) combined to 8th (0%)	$p < .01$
Justice	Stealing	Low Cost	Should	+	2d (46%) and 5th (42%) combined to 8th (87%)	$p < .004$
Justice	Stealing	Low Cost	Not all right not to	+	2d (0%) to 5th (37%) and 8th (25%) combined	$p < .004$
Justice	Stealing	High Cost	Not all right not to	+	2d (8%) to 5th (29%) to 8th (33%)	$p < .04$
Mitigating justice circumstances	Raffle	High Cost	Should not	+	2d (0%) and 5th (5%) combined to 8th (29%)	$p < .004$
Agent-centered	Lunch	Low Cost	Not all right not to	+	2d (0%) and 5th (0%) combined to 8th (44%)	$p < .005$
Agent-centered	Raffle	Low Cost	Not all right not to	+	2d (11%) and 5th (0%) combined to 8th (55%)	$p < .005$
Personal	Raffle	High Cost	All right not to	+	2d (0%) and 5th (8%) combined to 8th (21%)	$p < .04$

NOTE.—(1) "+" denotes an increase with age of the justification, "−" denotes a decrease. (2) The numbers reflect percent of children by each grade level who used a particular justification (and thus do not sum to 100). In contrast, Table 3 incorporates multiple justifications where the numbers reflect the percent of justifications used. Thus there is no logical necessity that a percentage in Table 3 be bounded by the "corresponding" pecentages in Table 4, though usually it turns out that way.

Age trends were then investigated for all children's justifications to their praiseworthy evaluations. The results showed a generalized developmental finding across all stories and conditions: In comparison to younger children, older children used a larger percentage of agent-centered than act-centered justifications. In the Low Cost condition, the magnitude of the difference was more pronounced in the two positive stories than in the negative story. In the Lunch Story (n = 62), 37% of the second graders provided agent-centered justifications, compared to 73% of the fifth graders and 81% of the eighth graders (Kendall's tau c = .38, $p < .005$). In the Raffle Story (n = 63), agent-centered justifications were used by 41% of the second graders, 74% of the fifth graders, and 94% of the eighth graders (Kendall's tau c = .47, $p < .0003$). In the Stealing Story (n = 68), to perform a valid test, second and fifth graders were combined (9%) and compared to eighth graders (29%) (Fisher's exact test, $p < .04$). In the High Cost condition, a similar pattern emerged. In the Lunch Story (n = 52), agent-centered justifications were used by 50% of the second graders, 65% of the fifth graders, and 100% of the eighth graders (Kendall's tau c = .44, $p < .001$). Gender differences were found within the second grade, where a greater percentage of females than males provided agent-centered reasoning (Fisher's exact test, $p < .02$). In the Raffle Story (n = 51), agent-centered justifications were used by 47% of the second graders, 71% of the fifth graders, and 94% of the eighth graders (Kendall's tau c = .42, $p < .003$). Finally, in the Stealing Story (n = 63), agent-centered justifications were used by 20% of the second graders, 36% of the fifth graders, and 71% of the eighth graders (Kendall's tau c = .45, $p < .0009$).

Legal evaluations.—Results showed that 99% of the children advocated a law to prohibit stealing in the Low Cost condition and 88% in the High Cost condition. In contrast, in the Lunch Story, 19% of the children advocated a law to provide money in the Low Cost condition, and 3% in the High Cost condition. Similarly, in the Raffle Story, 25% of the children advocated a law to provide money in the Low Cost condition, and 3% in the High Cost condition.

An issue considered was whether those children who advocated a law correspondingly viewed the act as obligatory. Analyses were conducted on the four conditions where a minimal percentage of children advocated a law (thus excluding the High Cost conditions in both positive stories where only 3% of the children advocated a law). Fisher's exact tests were used except in the one case where 100% of the subjects viewed the act as obligatory, resulting in a degenerate contingency table, and subsequently tested based on the binomial distribution. All four tests were significant. In the Low Cost conditions, for the Lunch Story (n = 64), 75% of the children who advocated a law conceived of the act as obligatory, $p < .02$; for the Raffle Story (n = 68), 88%, $p < .0001$; for the Stealing Story (n = 68), 100%, $p < .0001$. Finally, in the High Cost condition for the Stealing Story (n= 53), 98% of the children who advocated a law conceived of the act as obligatory, $p < .0001$.

Discussion

The results from this study suggest that children as young as second grade make distinctions between moral acts that are morally obligatory for a moral agent to perform, and moral acts that are left to the moral agent's discretion. This distinction, in turn, provides a basis for understanding psychologically a potential asymmetry between positive and negative morality. Two central results bear on this point. First, children less often conceived as obligatory performing the two positive acts at minimal cost to the agent than the corresponding negative act. Second, when affirmed, children less often maintained an obligatory judgment about the positive than negative acts when the cost to the agent went from low to high. These results support the proposition that while obligations can cut across children's reasoning about positive and negative moral acts, it is also the case in many situational contexts, particularly those that pivot on agent's cost, that children conceive of negative morality more stringently than they do positive morality.

In the psychological literature, substantial attention has been paid toward establishing criteria for assessing moral obligation (Kohlberg, 1971; Turiel, 1983). Given, however, that this study sought to chart new ground for establishing the moral basis of discretionary judgments, the following concern arises: How are morally discretionary judgments to be distinguished from strictly personal judgments (Nucci, 1981, 1989; Smetana, 1983), such as a judgment of which flavor ice cream to choose for dessert. Toward making this distinction, two criteria were used in consort. The first criterion

drew on Williams's (1985) proposal that one obvious way to assess the moral status of a discretionary act is to assess whether the act would be greatly admired or well thought of. Such an assessment was made in terms of praiseworthiness: whether children thought the protagonist of the story should be praised for performing the positive act. Results showed across all four positive conditions that of the children who viewed the positive acts as discretionary, the large majority (over 90%) provided praiseworthy evaluations. The second criterion drew on children's justifications for praising. Two results are of interest. First, across all four positive conditions, the large majority (over 86%, with an average of 94%) of justifications children provided for praising entailed concern with other's welfare or virtuous character. Second, of the children who said that the Low Cost positive acts should be performed (but viewed the acts to be discretionary), the large majority (over 90%) of their justifications entailed concern with other's welfare. Given that concerns with human welfare and virtue are central to moral discourse and moral theory, and taking such justifications in conjunction with the praiseworthy evaluations, the results help establish children's discretionary judgments as moral.

Based on this criterion of praiseworthiness, results showed that children accorded the most praise to performing positive discretionary acts, somewhat less praise to fulfilling positive obligations, and even less praise or no praise to fulfilling negative obligations. Such results add specificity to the intuitive notion that praise applies more readily to positive than negative morality. However, the results need to be understood within the context of what children meant when they accorded praise. Recall that in the interview children were posed with questions pertaining to whether they would praise the *person* for performing the act. Results showed that younger children provided more act-centered justifications, and older children more agent-centered justifications. In other words, while younger children readily engaged in dialogue about this issue, they consistently talked about praising the act and not the actor. These findings show how with increasing age children draw on psychological concepts of person to establish an understanding of virtue, including that of benevolence, sacrifice, and supererogation.

Two possible confounds in the study should be addressed. It can be noted that the positive stories portray a child protagonist, while the negative story portrays an adult protagonist. Thus, it could be reasoned, because of this difference children viewed negative morality more stringently than positive morality. Several considerations, however, provide a check on this line of reasoning. If adult status had played a pivotal role in children's reasoning about the stealing story, such a finding could be expected to be evident in children's justifications, particularly as captured within the broad scope of the authority justification category. However, as shown by Table 3, authority justifications played little role in children's reasoning. In addition, numerous other studies have shown that children judge it morally wrong for children to steal (Davidson et al., 1983; Dodsworth-Rugani, 1982; Shweder et al., 1987; Song, Smetana, & Kim, 1987; Tisak, 1986; Tisak & Ford, 1986; Tisak & Turiel, 1984). Thus, had the present study used a child protagonist, there is little reason to have expected contrary findings. Still, in future studies the distinction between adult and child status is worth pursuing, particularly in the ways in which children judge adult commands to be constrained by the command's moral legitimacy (Laupa, 1991; Laupa & Turiel, 1986).

The second potential confound can be framed as follows. Since the negative story portrays an illegal act and the positive stories do not, it could be said that the results for the obligatory and discretionary judgments confound positive/negative with legal/illegal features of the acts. For this to be the case, though, it would mean that negative acts are conceived as obligatory because society makes them illegal. However, a consistent finding from studies by Turiel and his colleagues is that moral obligatory judgments do not depend on the illegality of the act—a criterion judgment referred to as rule contingency.

Recall, moreover, that this study sought to extend domain-specific research by asking children questions that pertained, not to rule contingency per se, but to whether children would advocate a law for obligatory and discretionary moral acts. Results showed that of those children who advocated a law, the large majority correspondingly conceived of the act as obligatory. Thus, these results begin to provide a constructivist psychological account of law that is compatible with Dworkin's (1978, 1986) thinking in jurisprudence: that law derives its legitimacy from individuals' ongoing moral constructions, and that

this point must be taken into account as law codifies social practices.

Another issue for discussion concerns recent controversy on gender differences, and specifically the proposition (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988) that while men and boys are primarily oriented toward justice, women and girls are primarily oriented toward an ethic of care. Three results did not support this proposition. First, no gender differences were found in the use of welfare (care-like) and justice justifications. Second, as a group and individually, children often provided both justice and welfare justifications in supporting a particular evaluation. Third, given the proposition that females more than males are oriented to an ethic of care, it could reasonably be expected that girls more often than boys would have said that the protagonist should give money to the starving family, particularly in the high cost conditions where the stimuli were less weighted toward moral obligation. For, particularly in these latter conditions, feelings of care and not considerations based on duty or justice would presumably motivate helping evaluations. However, the evaluation results showed no effects of gender.

Part of the difficulty in examining where and how gender differences do occur in moral development may be because of the structural interrelatedness of what in the literature has to date been treated largely as diverse and distinct moral constructs. Two results in particular address this issue. Recall that younger children emphasized welfare concerns and older children justice. These results are consistent with previous studies by Davidson et al. (1983) and Walker (1989), and support the proposition that justice concepts build on concepts of welfare (see also Arsenio, 1988). More direct support for this proposition comes by reconceiving of the welfare-in-compensation category. This category—which, like justice, was used more by older than younger children—has been analyzed and reported as a welfare category, as the welfare needs of the protagonist and family were set in some compensatory balance (e.g., the protagonist should give the money "because he would still have something for breakfast and dinner and the lady would still have all of the money to buy food"). However, this category can also be viewed as welfare considerations organized by an equilibratory structure, since the very balancing of two distinct welfare claims may reflect a form of justice, though framed so as to highlight human needs. This is not to say that justice replaces welfare, but necessarily incorporates it. Thus this analysis moves toward understanding how both constructs depend and draw upon each other ontogenetically.

In its largest perspective, it is this sort of analysis that this study seeks to highlight. By recasting the starting point for moral-developmental investigations in terms of the distinction between obligatory and discretionary moral judgments, the very nature of the initial question changes. Instead of asking which moral construct is the most important to the moral life, or the most important to some subset of the population, the question becomes how to analyze different, epistemologically grounded moral constructs and their potential relations. To provide a bit more of a sense of this endeavor, consider a study in progress by the author on children's environmental moral reasoning. In this study, it is hypothesized that judgments about why we should protect the natural environment (such as why we should protect the ocean from oil spills) can tap obligatory judgments (because oil spills kill fish and thus harm the economic well-being of fishermen) and discretionary judgments (because such destruction sets up a wrong, inharmonious relation between the individual and the earth). The latter is an issue of virtue, the former of welfare and/or justice. Thus a means is needed—and one is offered here based on the distinction between obligatory and discretionary moral judgments—for future studies to analyze substantively such different moral constructs and their potential coexistence, coordination, and structural integration.

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