

Automaticity, Character Development, and Agency: Exploring a Tripartite Model of Moral Agency

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Recent empirical research in the psychological sciences has led to the ‘automaticity challenge to moral agency’. In short, the challenge holds that, since people’s moral behaviour (judgements, actions, attitudes) is often driven by automatic, unconscious, affective processes, rather than conscious, rational deliberation, they typically lack ‘moral agency’, as this is identified by involvement of the latter type of process. (Haidt 2001; Doris 2002; Nichols 2004; Prinz 2007)

The debate between more pessimistic and optimistic philosophical interpretations of the empirical material is blooming. However, I argue it is rather stuck in a stalemate where even a charitable reading may defend some limited, but nonetheless insufficient degree of agency. This is because the standard concept of agency, employed by philosophers and psychologists alike, comprises a set of conditions that limits the conceptual space for agency and thus frames automaticity as ‘operant’ challenge. In order to resolve the challenge, moral agency itself ought to be reconceptualised.

I propose a novel, ‘tripartite’ notion of moral agency by conceptually distinguishing three distinct, but complementary *modus operandi* of exhibiting agency; ‘deliberatively’, ‘moderatively’, and ‘developmentally’. I argue that a tripartite agency concept advances the debate in two main ways. For one, it allows us to re-interpret various contributions as ‘moderative agency’ and thus appreciate their merit as *alleviating* albeit not *resolving* the challenge. (Hogarth 2001; Snow 2006; Kennett & Fine 2009; Narvaez 20011; Musschenga 2011; Sauer 2012) Secondly, it allows us to shift the primary role of moral reasoning away from an ‘operational’, behaviour-guiding one and appreciate its ‘configurational’ merit by centralising an agent’s long-term self-development of their own ‘moral character’ as distinct agentive mode. I conclude that a tripartite concept of agency is empirically viable by successfully holding up in the face of the automaticity challenge and hint at how it may also be normative useful by serving as foundation for further theory-building.