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Moral Consciousness and Moral Judgment: Cognitive, Affective and Volitional Dimensions of Ethical Agency

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Abstract

Moral consciousness is not exhausted by the intellectual recognition that an action is right or wrong. Ethical agency ordinarily involves judgment, feeling and motivation: an agent apprehends the moral quality of conduct, responds to it through approval, disapproval, remorse or related sentiments, and experiences some practical pressure to act accordingly. This article develops that tripartite account from the traditional ethical framework reflected in J. S. Mackenzie's moral philosophy and relates it to contemporary debates about moral judgment and motivation. It distinguishes moral judgment from logical and aesthetic judgment, examines the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions of moral consciousness, and considers Mackenzie's "universe of desire" as a way of understanding the relation between character and particular desires. The analysis then places this framework in dialogue with sentimentalist, rationalist, internalist and externalist approaches to moral motivation. It argues that moral consciousness is best understood as an integrated structure in which cognition, emotion and volition are distinguishable but practically interdependent. Such an account explains both the action-guiding character of moral judgment and the possibility of failures in moral motivation.

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Introduction

Moral life involves more than knowing propositions about conduct. When a person judges an act to be unjust, cruel, honest or obligatory, the judgment normally bears upon the person's feelings, choices and conduct. The philosophical problem is to explain how these dimensions fit together. Is moral consciousness primarily a form of cognition, an emotional response, an exercise of will, or a complex in which all three are involved? The question is important because an adequate theory of morality must explain not only how people identify right and wrong but also why moral judgments so often possess practical force.

The Philosophy-IV source material from which this study develops treats moral consciousness as having three distinguishable factors: cognitive or intellectual, affective or emotional, and conative or volitional. It describes moral judgment as the principal cognitive factor, moral sentiments as the emotional factor, and moral obligation or the impulse towards right action as the conative factor. It also distinguishes moral judgment from logical and aesthetic judgment by emphasising its connection with obligation and

moral sentiment. This traditional framework provides a useful starting point for a contemporary philosophical inquiry because modern metaethics continues to debate the relationship between moral judgment, emotion and motivation (Rosati, 2016).

This article therefore has two aims. First, it reconstructs the account of moral consciousness found in the source notes and in the ethical tradition associated with J. S. Mackenzie. Second, it places that account in dialogue with influential philosophical positions concerning moral motivation. The central claim is that cognition, affect and volition should neither be collapsed into one another nor treated as wholly independent. Moral consciousness is better understood as an integrated practical structure whose elements may come apart in exceptional cases but ordinarily operate together.

Research Problem and Method

The research problem concerns the structure of moral consciousness and the practical authority of moral judgment. A purely cognitive theory must explain why moral judgments characteristically motivate; a purely sentimental theory must

explain the apparent role of reasons, standards and deliberation; and a purely volitional account risks overlooking the evaluative content that gives moral action its direction. The study asks: (i) what distinguishes moral judgment from logical and aesthetic judgment; (ii) how cognitive, affective and conative elements interact in moral consciousness; (iii) how character and desire are related in Mackenzie's idea of a "universe of desire"; and (iv) how this framework bears upon the contemporary internalism–externalism debate about moral motivation.

The method is conceptual, interpretive and comparative. The paper begins with the concepts and distinctions contained in the author's Philosophy-IV notes and uses Mackenzie's *A Manual of Ethics* as a primary historical source. It then compares that framework with selected discussions in Hume, Kant and contemporary moral philosophy. No empirical study involving human participants or animals is undertaken. The purpose is not to claim that the traditional framework resolves every metaethical controversy, but to test whether its tripartite structure remains philosophically illuminating.

Moral Judgment as a Judgment of Value

A moral judgment evaluates an action, intention, disposition or character from a moral point of view. The source notes define it as a judgment of value rather than a mere judgment of fact: to judge morally is to pronounce an action right or wrong. This evaluative character separates moral judgment from a simple descriptive report. "The person broke a promise" describes conduct; "the person acted wrongly in breaking the promise" evaluates it under a moral standard.

The notes place Ethics, Logic and Aesthetics among normative disciplines concerned respectively with the ideals of the Good, Truth and Beauty. The distinction is significant. A logical judgment assesses validity or truth-directed reasoning; an aesthetic judgment assesses qualities such as beauty or artistic merit; a moral judgment assesses conduct and character under an ethical standard. All may be critical or appreciative, yet the source material assigns moral judgment a distinctive practical dimension: it is characteristically accompanied by the sense that one ought, or ought not, to act in a certain way.

This practical dimension remains central to contemporary moral philosophy. Rosati (2016) describes moral motivation as the familiar phenomenon in which moral judgments typically exert some motivational hold upon agents. The fact that such judgments are ordinarily action-guiding does not by itself establish that motivation is logically necessary, but it explains why the relationship between judgment and motivation has become a major metaethical problem.

The Cognitive Dimension of Moral Consciousness

The cognitive factor concerns apprehension, comparison and evaluation. On the account contained in the notes, the agent apprehends a moral standard, considers a voluntary action in relation to that standard and judges the action right or wrong. Moral consciousness consequently includes concepts such as right and duty, virtue and vice, merit and demerit, and responsibility. These are not merely feelings; they involve an understanding of the normative significance of conduct.

A cognitive dimension is indispensable because moral disagreement is frequently conducted through reasons. People ask whether a rule is consistent, whether relevant cases are alike, whether an exception is justified, and whether an agent could reasonably have acted otherwise. Such questions presuppose that moral evaluation is answerable, at least in part, to considerations that can be articulated and examined.

Kant's mature moral philosophy gives reason a particularly strong role. Kantian ethics treats moral requirements as grounded in practical reason rather than contingent feeling. Although the present paper does not adopt Kant's full theory, the rationalist tradition highlights a genuine feature of moral consciousness: an agent can reflect critically upon immediate impulses and ask whether a proposed action is justifiable. Moral consciousness is therefore not reducible to whatever emotion happens to arise at a given moment (Kant, 1785/2012).

The Affective Dimension: Moral Sentiments

The source notes identify approval, disapproval, complacency and remorse as moral sentiments. When an agent apprehends an action as right, a feeling of approbation may follow; when the agent apprehends an action as wrong, disapprobation may arise. Retrospective self-assessment may produce satisfaction after right conduct or remorse after wrongdoing. These responses give moral experience an affective texture that a purely abstract theory can miss.

The philosophical importance of sentiment is especially clear in Hume. Hume's moral theory gives sentiment a constitutive role in moral evaluation, maintaining that moral distinctions are intimately connected with characteristic feelings of approval and disapproval (Hume, 1739–1740/2007). Contemporary experimental moral philosophy likewise treats the relation between emotion and moral judgment as a major field of inquiry, while cautioning against any simple equation of emotion with irrationality (Alfano *et al.*, 2025).

Yet the source notes also make a useful distinction: the existence of a moral sentiment is not itself the criterion of the validity of a moral judgment. A person may feel intense disapproval and still judge badly. Prejudice can be emotionally powerful; remorse can be misplaced; approval can attach to conduct later recognised as unjust. Emotion is therefore an important component of moral consciousness without automatically supplying its standard of correctness.

The Conative or Volitional Dimension

The third-dimension concerns choice, obligation and action. Moral consciousness does not stop at recognising and feeling; it bears upon what the agent is to do. The source notes describe this in terms of regulation of impulses by reason according to a conception of the highest good, choice by the self, and the moral impulse to perform the right action. The sense of "oughtness" is therefore central.

This feature connects the traditional account directly with the contemporary problem of moral motivation. Internalist positions maintain, in stronger or weaker forms, that sincere moral judgment is necessarily connected with some motivation to act. Externalists deny that such a connection is necessary, even if it is common. Contemporary debate also asks whether moral belief can motivate by itself or whether motivation always requires an independently existing desire or conative state (Rosati, 2016).

The tripartite account does not need to settle this debate by definition. It can instead recognise a phenomenological fact: mature moral consciousness normally contains a volitional orientation. An agent may fail to act because of fear, weakness of will, exhaustion or competing desire, but moral judgment characteristically presents itself as practically relevant. This allows the account to preserve the difference between judging an action right and successfully performing it.

Mackenzie's 'Universe of Desire' and the Role of Character

Mackenzie's idea of a "universe of desire" adds an important account of context and character. A particular desire does not stand alone; it belongs to a wider organisation of dispositions that constitutes the person's ethical point of view at a given moment. Mackenzie observes that different moods, conditions and states may alter which desires dominate, so that the same individual can move between different practical "universes" (Mackenzie, 1897).

This idea helps explain why moral agency cannot be analysed simply by listing isolated wants. A desire to tell the truth, avoid embarrassment, protect a friend and preserve self-interest may coexist, but their practical significance depends upon the agent's broader character and ordering of values. Character supplies a relatively stable background, while particular circumstances can reorganise attention and motivation.

The concept also illuminates weakness of will. An individual may sincerely endorse a moral standard at one level of reflection yet, under pressure, enter a practical orientation dominated by fear, resentment or immediate advantage. The moral judgment has not necessarily disappeared; rather, its motivational place within the agent's operative set of desires has changed. Mackenzie's framework therefore anticipates a useful distinction between possessing a moral conviction and having that conviction effectively govern action.

Rationalism, Sentimentalism and an Integrated Account

Rationalist and sentimentalist traditions often appear to compete for priority. Rationalism emphasises judgment, reasons and principles; sentimentalism emphasises affective responses and their motivational role. The tripartite account suggests that the opposition may be overstated when the object of explanation is ordinary moral consciousness rather than the ultimate metaphysical foundation of morality.

Moral judgment can contain cognitive content while also being characteristically accompanied by affect and motivation. Contemporary moral epistemology recognises hybrid possibilities in which moral responses may combine belief, emotion and motivation rather than fitting neatly into a single psychological category (Timmons, 2023). This does not show that every moral judgment necessarily contains all three elements in equal strength. It instead supports a layered account in which the components are analytically distinguishable and empirically or phenomenologically variable.

Such integration also makes sense of moral development. Ethical education is not achieved merely by teaching propositions. It involves cultivating the capacity to perceive morally relevant features, to respond appropriately to suffering and injustice, and to form habits that translate judgment into conduct. Conversely, emotional cultivation without critical reflection can entrench bias, while abstract reasoning without concern or motivation can become practically inert.

Moral Obligation and the Possibility of Motivational Failure

A serious theory must account for cases in which a person judges an action morally required but remains unmoved. The philosophical figure of the "amoralist" tests strong forms of internalism: can someone sincerely understand that an act is wrong while being wholly indifferent to that fact? Contemporary literature treats such cases as important

evidence in the dispute between internalists and externalists (Rosati, 2016). The source framework can accommodate motivational failure by distinguishing the three dimensions. Cognitive recognition may persist while affective response is weak and conative force is overridden. This possibility does not make the dimensions unrelated. Indeed, the very description of such a case as moral failure presupposes an expected relationship between judgment and action.

An integrated account therefore supports a moderate conclusion. Moral consciousness ordinarily tends towards coherence among judgment, sentiment and volition, but human agency permits fragmentation. The possibility of fragmentation explains hypocrisy, weakness of will and moral indifference; the tendency towards integration explains why moral education aims not merely at correct answers but at the formation of character.

Ethics as a Normative Inquiry

The Philosophy-IV notes also define Ethics as the study of right and wrong conduct and, more broadly, of the highest good. They distinguish normative inquiry from purely descriptive explanation. Historical, biological and psychological methods can explain the origin, development or psychological operation of moral phenomena, but the notes insist that such explanations do not by themselves establish moral validity. A fact about what people desire does not automatically determine what is desirable.

This distinction remains philosophically important. Empirical psychology can illuminate how moral judgments are formed, which emotions influence them, and when they motivate behaviour. Those findings matter for moral philosophy, but they do not automatically answer normative questions about which judgments are justified. The traditional warning against deriving the ideal solely from the actual thus retains methodological value.

At the same time, the notes reject an exclusively abstract method and propose an approach that is empirical as well as philosophical. For the present inquiry, that suggestion is productive: moral philosophy should attend to actual moral experience while retaining the critical task of evaluating reasons, standards and ideals.

Discussion: Moral Consciousness as Ethical Agency

The foregoing analysis supports an account of moral consciousness as ethical agency rather than as a single mental event. Cognition provides evaluative orientation; affect registers the significance of what is apprehended; volition connects evaluation with choice and action. Character organises these elements over time and supplies the background against which particular desires acquire practical meaning.

This model avoids three reductions. First, it avoids intellectualism that treats moral consciousness as detached knowledge. Second, it avoids emotional reductionism that treats felt approval as sufficient for moral validity. Third, it avoids voluntarism that makes choice independent of reasons and evaluative understanding. The three dimensions constrain and support one another.

The model also explains why moral maturity is difficult. A person may know what is right but lack sympathy; may feel compassion but reason inconsistently; or may judge and feel appropriately yet fail to act. Ethical development seeks greater integration among these capacities. In that sense, moral consciousness is both evaluative and practical: it is consciousness of moral significance directed towards the formation of conduct and character.

Conclusion

Moral consciousness is most adequately understood as a complex unity of cognition, affect and volition. The Philosophy-IV framework captures this structure by associating moral judgment with the cognitive factor, moral sentiments with the emotional factor, and obligation and action-orientation with the conative factor. Its distinction between moral, logical and aesthetic judgments further highlights the practical force characteristically associated with morality.

Mackenzie's "universe of desire" deepens this account by locating particular desires within character and an agent's broader ethical point of view. Contemporary debates about moral motivation show that the relation between judgment and action remains contested, but they also confirm the importance of explaining why moral judgments ordinarily matter practically.

The integrated view defended here does not claim that cognition, emotion and motivation are inseparable in every psychological case. Rather, it argues that their ordinary interdependence is central to ethical agency. Moral failure often appears precisely when the dimensions come apart; moral development seeks their more coherent integration. The traditional tripartite conception therefore remains a useful philosophical framework for understanding the lived structure of moral consciousness.

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