Andreea BOBB*

**Review of *The Social Psychology of Morality*
by J.P. Forgas, L. Jussim & P.A.M. Van Lange (eds.),
Routledge, 2016, 327 pages**

This volume, that brings together the papers presented at the annual Sydney Symposium of Social Psychology, cannot but be enjoyed by the growing community of social psychologists interested in the field of morality. This is only the second book on morality that has the expression “social psychology” in its title after the *Social Psychology of Morality: Exploring the Causes of Good and Evil* (2012), edited by Mikulincer and Shaver. Forgas, Jussim and Van Lange (2016, p. 1) belief is that „*Homo moralis* is no less an appropriate term to describe humans as is *Homo sapiens*” and that social psychology has the privilege to unravel and understand human morality. I agree with the point of view expressed by the editors of this volume, especially considering the fact that social psychology could be seen as “the most humane among humanities” (see Chelcea, 2008, p. 20).

The book has four parts: “The Nature of Moral Values and Decisions”; “Moral Aspects of Interpersonal Behavior”; “Ironic and Paradoxical Effects of Morality”; “Morality and Collective Behavior”. The first two parts of the book present morality in relation to some antecedents. For example, death awareness makes us behave morally (chapter 2). In turn, our behavior determines our moral identity (chapter 3). Moral judgment is also determined by our deontological and utilitarian tendencies (chapter 6). The second part of the book presents how moral judgments are influenced by feelings we have for close others (chapter 7), and how moral judgments are modified in a competitive context (chapter 8); Also how moral judgments change when social pressure is exerted (chapter 9), and how they differ as a result of a positive or negative mood (chapter 10). The third section of the book (chapter 11, 12, 13) discusses the influence of moral agenda on scientific research and how scientists themselves violate moral norms. The last part connects moral values with political values (chapter 14), with prosocial behavior (chapter 15), and with the use of natural resources (chapter 16). The last two chapters show how inequality of differences in opportunities may increase immoral behavior and how moral heroes prone cohesion among members of the group. All chapters treat morality either as an outcome of a rational process (e.g. moral judgment), or as an intuitive human capacity that influences our judgments, values, behaviors. The current review presents the most relevant chapters from a social psychological perspective.

* University of Bucharest, Romania,
andreeabobb@yahoo.com

In a chapter from the first part of the book, *Moral Opportunities Versus Moral Tests*, Miller and Monin divide all moral situations in two categories: moral tests and moral opportunities. In the case of moral tests, moral behavior is mandatory, so that an immoral behavior would generate a decrease of self-esteem. In the case of moral opportunity, an immoral behavior would not determine lower self-esteem, but a moral behavior would increase the level of self-assigned morality. Miller and Monin state that once a person behaves in a negative manner, she/he will be motivated to restore the positive self by searching for opportunities to act morally in subsequent actions. It is true that sometimes people act like Miller and Monin say, but social psychologists have long time proven that most of the time we are not willing to acknowledge the fact that we have behaved immorally. The authors also believe we have the tendency to avoid moral tests and search for moral opportunities. Unfortunately, Miller and Monin do not provide any experiment designed to test these ideas, nor any clear examples of situations that capture moral tests and opportunities. An example of conceptual clarification that the authors provide is “the more of an opportunity a situation provides, the less of a test it represents, and vice versa” (p. 42). The authors also recognize that whereas some people perceive a situation as a test, for others it could represent an opportunity; and even for the same person a situation may sometimes be viewed as a test and at other times as an opportunity. Given these clarifications, one can ask about the usefulness of such typology.

The moral behavior may be considered as a shield that protects us against death anxiety, argues Pyszczynski in a chapter included in the first part of the book. He asserts that we behave morally to transcend our mortal condition. In other words, we do good to others so that we receive “rewards” after we die.

Cooper’s chapter, *Confessing to an Immoral Act: Consequences to Moral Beliefs and Inferences about Moral Dispositions*, is a documented response to the problem of innocent people admitting crimes they have never committed, as result of psychological pressure during interrogations. In this context, the author presents an experiment in which participants were asked to type a list of words into computer without pressing the ALT key and then invited to sign a statement (Kassin & Kiechel, 1996). It showed that 65% of participants who typed the words very quickly were easily convinced to sign a statement saying that they pressed the ALT key, when they had not. The percentage rose to 100% when a confederate told the experimenter that he saw another participant in the experiment having pressed the ALT key. In the no-witness condition and when the person had enough time to type, none of participants admitted having pressed the ALT key and 65% refused to sign the statement. It is interesting to note that participants, who admitted having pressed the ALT key during the experiment, later came to believe they actually did it.

In a similar vein, Cooper extended these findings to a moral situation, namely cheating. In his own experiment, students had to respond to a test and were accused of taking extra time to answer the questions. They were induced to confess to having cheated. Although none of the participants cheated, those who confessed came to believe it. Also, they came to view themselves as less moral (pp. 148-149). Cooper stated that once we think of ourselves as less moral, we end up behaving in a manner that will confirm the new self-image (p. 150).

Also, in the second part of the book, Forgas presents numerous experiments on the influence of moods on moral decisions. The author proved that a positive affect increases selfishness in situations like dictator game and ultimatum game, whereas a negative mood increases fairness (p.165). So, it is not so bad to sometimes feel bad.

In an interesting chapter from the third part of the book, *Concept Creep: Psychology's Expanding Notions of Harm and their Moral Basis*, Haslam argues that “definitional inflation” is not beneficial. He shows how some psychological concepts like: abuse, trauma, mental disorder, bullying and prejudice have come to include wide range of behaviors that were not initially covered by these concepts. Nowadays, we talk about emotional abuse, psychological abuse and emotional neglect in addition to physical and sexual abuse. Trauma can now refer to different events and their psychological effects, although it is clear that one traumatic event may not have the same strong impact for one person as to another. “One person using an ethnic slur towards another, can now count as abuse, bullying, trauma, and prejudice by some definitions. This redundancy breeds conceptual confusion and parallel literatures.” (p. 211). The two remaining chapters included in the third part of this book connect morality with academic research. Fiedler talks about scientists’ moral values and academic dishonesty. After listing some unorthodox ways that some scientists use their data to support the hypothesis, Fiedler talks about the surprising compliance of social psychologists, especially those who are familiar with classic studies on conformism and obedience, with what he calls “the demon of statistical-significance testing” (p. 223). He observes with regret that journals do not encourage critical debates, but only studies “full of statistics”.

The fourth part of this volume deals with issues like moral leadership, moral heroes, and prosocial behavior in a rather theoretical manner. In my opinion, the most interesting chapter is *The Moral Psychology of Resource Use*. Bastian and Crimston present a new instrument, *The Moral Expansiveness Scale* (Crimston et al., 2016), which “captures individual differences in the extent to which people’s moral worlds are either more or less expansive” (p. 278). The authors argue that each person has a moral universe that can enlarge to include more distant people, plants and objects. It was found that those who scored higher in moral expansiveness were more willing to share resources with distant others.

When I finished reading this book, I remembered Bauman’s (1998, p. 11) wise observation: whatever had been said about morality, the most important things remain unsaid. It is true that human morality is not something very easy to study, but social psychology has made progress in this fascinating field and still has a lot to discover about everyday morality, about moral judgments in their natural dynamics and how these moral judgments are shaped by different social and cultural contexts.

Reference

- Bauman, Z. (1998). What prospects of morality in times of uncertainty? *Theory, Culture and Society*, 15(1), 11-22.
- Chelcea, S. (2008). Psihosociologia – domeniu de studiu interdisciplinar. În S. Chelcea (Ed.): *Psihosociologie: Teorii, cercetări, aplicații* (pp. 15-32). Iași: Polirom.
- Crimston, D., Bain, P.G., Hornsey, M.J., & Bastian, B. (2016). Moral expansiveness: Examining variability in the extension of the moral world. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 111(4), 636-53.
- Kassin, S.M. & Kiechel, K.L. (1996). The social psychology of false confessions: Compliance, internalization and confabulation. *Psychological Science*, 7(3), 125-128.
- Mikulincer, M. & Shaver, P.R. (2012). *Social Psychology of Morality: Exploring the Causes of Good and Evil*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.