The Importance of Context in Moral Judgments

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Abstract

There is a gap between morality as experienced and morality as studied. In our personal and professional lives, moral judgments are embedded within a specific context. We know the who, what, where and when, and often can infer the why; we know the broader context of actions; and we may have a specific relationship with the actors. However, scholarly theorizing is often built on inferences from participants’ responses to decontextualized, impoverished stimuli. In our quest for uncovering general psychological truths, moral psychologists have examined evaluations of poorly guarded trolleys, strangers with odd sexual proclivities, and endorsement of abstract principles. The four articles included in this section demonstrate the power of contextualizing morality. Here, I place these papers within a broader framework for how scholars can contextualize morality research. I then argue why contextualizing morality matters: not only do contextualized questions better reflect the nuances of reality, but contextualized judgments might be key for improving predictions of moral behavior and understanding moral change.
The Importance of Context in Moral Judgments

Take a moment to answer the following questions: 1) When you form moral judgments, to what extent do you consider whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group? 2) You are a recent college graduate in your first job as a lab associate at a biotech startup. You fully believe in the startup’s mission – to revolutionize and democratize blood-testing – and you idolize the founder. However, your idealism quickly dissipates as you realize that the famed blood-testing machines are outputting vastly inconsistent results. When you inform your supervisor, you are instructed to simply delete any data inconsistent with the desired results. Your appeal to the company’s leadership is then met with mockery, threats, and gaslighting. Do you have a moral obligation to not only resign, but also file an official whistleblower report with governmental regulators, even though you know doing so will betray the company that gave you your first chance?

These questions both involve moral concerns over loyalty. The first question is taken directly from the loyalty subscale of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2011) and measures the extent to which one believes that loyalty is relevant for moral judgments. The second question roughly describes the situation faced by Erika Cheung, whose official report to federal health regulators hastened the end of Theranos, a biotech startup once valued in the billions (Carreyrou, 2018). Responses to the first question might correspond with responses to the latter. After all, if a person strongly endorses loyalty concerns, than it makes sense that they would also condemn betraying one’s employer. However, someone could strongly endorse principles of loyalty at an abstract level, while also approving whistleblowing for scientific fraud. Even if loyalty is a deeply held value, the key question is loyalty to whom? If the concern is about disloyalty to your boss, then whistleblowing should be taboo; if the concern is disloyalty
to other stakeholders (e.g. the patients who trusted the company with their health) then remaining silent is highly disloyal. In this example, the context of disloyalty matters, as a concern for loyalty at an abstract level could conceivably translate into two opposing courses of action.

In their quest for psychological universals, moral psychology research, my own included, frequently examines morality, decontextualized. Across a variety of research paradigms, study stimuli lack key context information that exists in the background of real world moral scenarios. In addition to the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, which asks about the relevance of context-less statements, other research paradigms ask participants to rate the acceptability of actions with minimal contextual information (e.g. “sticking a pin in the hand of a child you don’t know,” Graham et al., 2011), or select the best course of action in trolley-style dilemmas that strain believability (Bauman, McGraw, Bartels, & Warren, 2014).

There are good reasons to defend this decontextualized approach. Carefully crafted stimuli have allowed scholars to systematically test competing predictions about which factors drive moral condemnation and about the structure of the moral mind. At a pragmatic level, it is quicker for participants to rate shorter vignettes. Additionally, ratings of abstract statements are relevant to a variety of research questions.

However, reliance on decontextualized moral stimuli has arguably led scholars to overlook important moral questions. In “Family, community, trolley problems and the crisis in moral psychology,” Paul Bloom (2011) argued that moral psychology is in crisis due to its reliance on impoverished stimuli that overlook personal relationships. By relying almost exclusively on vignettes about strangers, and not about spouses, friends, coworkers or neighbors, morality research overlooked questions about the importance of interpersonal obligations, in-group favoritism, and kin selection. Addressing Bloom’s concerns, in the last few years,
numerous scholars have advanced the field by specifying relationships in their research (Rai & Fiske, 2011; Waytz, Dungan, & Young, 2013; Everett, Faber, Savulescu, & Crockett, 2018; Weidman, Sowden, Berg, & Kross, 2019; Tepe & Aydinli-Karakulak, 2019; Simpson, Laham, & Fiske, 2016). Just as specifying the relationships of actors opens important areas of inquiry, specifying the general identity of the actor can address important questions about the impact of an agent’s race or gender on moral evaluations (Hester & Gray, this issue). Similarly, specifying an action (e.g. killing another person) in a specific setting (e.g. in war), can help morality researchers address pressing real-world concerns while advancing theory (Watkins, this issue).

In this paper, I provide a broad framework for how moral psychologists can better contextualize their research: by contextualizing the actors, actions, judge, and values. I then suggest several reasons for why this contextualization matters. More specifically, I will argue that contextualizing morality opens important questions of inquiry (See Table 1), and provides insights that could help predict moral behavior, and moral change. My overview of contextualization is not meant to be exhaustive; rather, it is intended as a way to organize current advancements in moral psychology with the goal of facilitating future research endeavors.

Table 1.

Guideline for Contextualizing Moral Psychology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Contextualization</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Sample Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>Race/Gender</td>
<td>How does the actor’s race, gender, and power impact moral evaluations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Power/Status</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>Applied Morality</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Unique Contexts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Judge</td>
<td>Individual Differences</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Subjective Experience</td>
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</table>
Contextualizing Morality

Did the employees of Theranos have a moral obligation to report their company to regulators? When I posed this question to my Introduction to Business Ethics students, they had a heated debated about the difference between actions vs. omissions, shareholders vs. stakeholders, and internal vs. external reporting. My students debated concerns that could apply to any employee in any organization. However, when my students posed this question to Cheung, her answer was quite different. Cheung hesitated to uniformly condemn the complicity of her previous colleagues. Although her moral courage cost her socially, psychologically, and financially, as an American citizen, Cheung knew she was not at risk of being deported or harming dependents, unlike many of her colleagues. Underlying Cheung’s response was a belief that an employee’s specific identity can reasonably impact moral evaluations of their behaviors.

Although we can debate the morality of actions performed by name-less, gender-less, age-less, family-less, race-less actors, individuating factors shape our moral evaluations. In Bad Blood, John Carreryou profiled two Theranos whistleblowers – Erika Cheung and Tyler Schultz. Cheung is the daughter of Asian immigrants who grew up in a working class family. When her name was leaked to the press, she was forced into hiding, sleeping on friends’ couches, unable to hire top lawyers. Schultz is a white upper-class man who is also the grandson of former Secretary of State George Schultz, a trustees at Theranos, and a close adviser to Theranos’ founder. His family paid over $400,000 securing top legal representation. Although both whistleblowers performed similar actions, the evaluations of those actions might differ in theoretically informative ways.
By examining specific identities, scholars can uncover how factors such as power, status, race, gender, and personal relationships each impact moral judgments. Researchers can examine whether low power or status individuals, such as Cheung, are perceived as having less responsibility for speaking-up than high power individuals in organizations (Wellman, Mayer, Ong, & DeRue, 2016). Researchers can also examine whether disloyalty is judged more harshly for Asian American women who might be uniquely penalized for violating stereotypes of submissiveness, or violating the model minority stereotype. Part of our identity as individuals is also interpersonal: we are children, parents, coworkers, countrymen, neighbors. Researchers can examine whether someone like Tyler Schultz is viewed as having a special obligation to intervene due to his privileged relationship with people in power, or if his whistleblowing is viewed more harshly because his betrayal also violated family obligations. Examining the impact of personal relationships can advance theorizing about whistleblowing (Waytz et al., 2013; Weidman et al., 2019).

In this issue, Hester and Gray systematically examine the limits of previous approaches in moral psychology with regard to the social identity of the actors and observers and provide concrete suggestions for future scholarship. In lieu of further discussion of identity here, I implore all scholars interested in moral judgments to carefully read their paper.

**Contextualizing Actions**

The first eight words in Watkins’ (this issue) abstract, “what is judged as morally right and wrong,” epitomize the structure of decontextualized morality research. Scholars have sought to uncover general truths about morality, examining what differentiates moral from non-moral evaluations (Nichols, 2002; Turiel, 1983); what process (or processes) underlie moral judgments (Greene, 2007); and how the moral mind is structured (Schein & Gray, 2018). To draw
conclusions that apply across a variety of moral situations, they often present participants with vignettes that fail to specify the larger context of the actions. For example, in my own research, I examine perceptions of brief, context-less vignettes (e.g. “having sex in exchange for money”; Schein, Ritter, & Gray, 2016), or the morality of one word actions (e.g. murder, pornography; Schein & Gray, 2015). With trolley problems, even if a context is provided, it is often one that is far beyond believability (Bauman et al., 2014).

Watkins’ (this issue) next two words in her abstract, “in war,” contextualizes her research question in a way that advances both the psychology of war and moral psychology. Although murder might typically be labeled immoral, Watkins’ research tests principles that impact people’s moral condemnation of this otherwise grave moral violation (Watkins & Brandt, 2019; Watkins & Goodwin, 2019). Following Watkins’ example, moral psychologists can benefit from critically considering morality of unique settings, such as the morality of artificial intelligence (Bigman & Gray, 2018) or the morality of suicide (Rottman & Kelemen, 2014).

In addition to examining unique moral scenarios, moral psychology can grow from a greater focus on everyday morality (Hofmann, Wisneski, Brandt, & Skitka, 2014), and applied moral questions (Inbar, 2018). Moral psychology is uniquely situated to shed light on some of today’s most pressing challenges. In the #metoo age, companies have both a moral and financial incentive to understanding the barriers to whistleblowing (Weidman et al., 2019). When faced with the imminent threat of climate change and global food insecurity, understanding the nature of people’s moral aversion to genetically modified food has immediate policy implication (Royzman, Cusimano, Metas, & Leeman, this issue). It is an open empirical question how these applied question will advance theorizing. Regardless of their findings, psychological science and society at large can benefit tremendously when editors continue to publish these research
programs in flagship, high impact outlets, and not relegate these cases to specialty or applied journals.

**Contextualizing Judges**

Even when identical actors perform identical actions in identical situations, moral evaluations can differ widely depending on who is doing the judging. Compared to the previous two contextual factors, there has been ample research in moral psychology on how individual differences or environmental pressures on the observer impact moral judgments (Hester & Gray, this issue). Previous research has documented the impact of incidental emotions (Gawronski, Conway, Armstrong, Friesdorf, & Hütter, 2018; Landy & Goodwin, 2015; Schnall, Benton, & Harvey, 2008), cognitive load (Wright & Baril, 2011), feeling of powerfulness (Lammers, Galinsky, Dubois, & Rucker, 2015), political ideology (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), religion (Cohen, 2015), gender (Ward & King, 2018), and cultural differences (Buchtel et al., 2015; McNamara, Willard, Norenzayan, & Henrich, 2019), on moral judgments. Given the breadth of previous scholarship, here I will focus on one specific feature that has received relatively less attention in moral psychology research: the subjective experience of the observers.

*Subjective Experience of Participant.* Imagine that you are a participant in a moral psychology study, and are asked to rate the morality of consensual sibling incest. You tell the researcher that incest is immoral; it harms the siblings, undermines their relationship and causes future harms. However, every time you bring up one of these concerns, the researcher shoots you down. The researcher claims that the act is harmless; the couple is using protection, love each other, and promise not to talk about their night with anyone else. Although you do not accept the researcher’s premise (Royzman, Kim, & Leeman, 2015), you eventually acquiesce, and claim that incest is just wrong, even if you cannot articulate way.
In the moral dumbfounding paradigm just described, understanding participant’s subjective experience fundamentally shifts the interpretation of the results (Royzman et al., 2015). Haidt and colleagues interpret this response as evidence of the primacy of emotions and intuitions over reasons in moral judgments (Haidt, 2001). After all, participants insist that incest is immoral even after all their moral reasons are invalidated. However, this conclusion fails to adequately consider the perspective of the participant, who consistently denies the researcher’s claims that the act is harmless. Accepting that participants have consistent reasons for their beliefs, which researchers failed to acknowledge, undermines claims in favor of social intuitionism (Guglielmo, 2017; Royzman et al., 2015). Taking participant’s experiences seriously totally shifts the interpretation of the findings.

At its core, the study of social psychology is the study of human experience (Wegner & Gilbert, 2000). Without a direct window into other people’s mental states, researchers are constantly faced with the challenge of inferring participants’ internal experiences from survey responses and behavioral choices. At times, the relationship between people’s external responses and their latent beliefs is fairly straightforward. It is uncontroversial to infer disapproval of GMOs from the endorsement of statements such as “GMOs should be prohibited.” Inferences are trickier to make from questions that have multiple parts or require participants to imagine a counterfactual state such as “GMOs should be prohibited no matter how great the benefits and minor the risks for allowing it” (Scott, Inbar, & Rozin, 2016).

Royzman and colleagues’ body of research consistently demonstrates how to conduct studies that accurately gauge human experience (Royzman, Cassidy, & Baron, 2003; Royzman et al., 2015). In this issue, Royzman, Cusimano, Metas & Leeman demonstrate the importance of carefully considering how participants interpret research questions. They lay out two
prerequisites for making valid inferences from survey questions: the comprehension requirement (do they understand the question) and the task acceptance requirement (do they have “the cognitive aptitude… to execute the task in question”). In a series of studies, Royzman et. al. (this issue) find that participants do not fully grasp the intended meaning of Scott et. al.’s (2016) initial question. By carefully taking participant’s understanding of the question into consideration and examining what “no matter the costs” really means, they were able to simultaneously replicate and undermine Scott et. al.’s (2016) initial claims. More broadly, they provide an illustration of the importance of researchers carefully examining how exactly participants understand and experience the research question prior to making broad theoretical inferences.

**Contextualizing Values**

Although moral questionnaires frequently ask participants to endorse abstract moral statements, or consider moral violations in isolation, real life moral decisions involve values situated in specific contexts. Sometimes moral situations involve value dilemmas. Here, I am not simply referring to sacrificial dilemmas (Cushman & Greene, 2012; Foot, 1967) that involve tradeoffs between deontological principles (e.g. do not harm) and utilitarian consequences (e.g. killing one to save five). These specific dilemmas fail to capture the full breadth of moral conflicts, and lack ecological validity (Bauman et al., 2014). Rather, I am referring to the realistic scenarios that require navigating competing moral and non-moral values. For example, in the whistleblowing case, loyalty to employers conflicts with protecting consumers from harm (Dungan, Young, & Waytz, 2019; Waytz et al., 2013). In free speech debates, liberty and autonomy conflict with safety and social order (Gibson, 2013). In debates over corporate social responsibility, concerns for environmentalism, patriotism, or ethical supply chains often conflict with short-term profitability and shareholder value.
Endorsements of abstract moral principles such as loyalty, liberty, environmentalism, or patriotism are likely poor predictors of judgments when values conflict. To best understand whistleblowing decisions, it may not be enough to ask about one’s general concern for loyalty, or fairness in isolation. What might better predict moral evaluations is how one prioritizes obligation to your own group relative to obligations to the broader community (Dungan et al., 2019). Political science research on civil liberties clearly demonstrates how decontextualized, abstract moral questions are poor predictors of concrete concerns. Although American participants overwhelmingly endorse decontextualized statements such as “it is important to extend political rights to all people, regardless of their beliefs,” when this freedom has historically conflicted with other values, such as moral disapproval for homosexuality or communism, the endorsement of specific civil liberties falls substantially (Gibson, 2013; McClosky & Brill, 1983). Placing abstract values such as loyalty or liberty into concrete situations shifts moral judgments in meaningful ways.

Measurements of abstract values not only fail to capture moral judgments when values conflicts, they also fail to adequately capture how people perceive value in the world. With regard to civil liberties, while almost all Americans believe at an abstract level that civil rights should exist, perceptions of specific civil liberties depends on who’s perceived to have these inherent rights (Gibson, 2013). In 1972, 48% of survey respondents claimed that “a man who admits that he is a homosexual” should not be allowed to teach in a college or university. That percent was down to 11% in 2018.1 Questions measuring broad endorsement of civil liberties, would be unable to detect this change. Similarly, moral judgment of disobedience depend on perceptions of who is a legitimate source of authority (Frimer, Gaucher, & Schaefer, 2014), and

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moral judgments of harm depend on perceptions of vulnerability and moral rights (Schein & Gray, 2018). The same action, such as destroying a fetus, can be construed in vastly different ways depending on whether a fetus is perceived as a mass of mindless cells, or a human capable of experiencing pain, and worthy of moral concern.

In this issue, Beal compellingly demonstrates the benefit of shifting from questions that gauge abstract moral values to questions that more accurately measure participant’s perceptions of the inherent value of entities involved in a scenario. His example of slavery is particularly illustrative:

If you could ask an early white American one question to discover their moral feelings about slavery, what would it be? 1) A question probing how much they value justice, welfare, or liberty? Or 2) A question probing to what extent they view nonwhites as being equal to whites? It seems obvious to me that the question about values would lead one astray (Page 27).

I share Beal’s intuition that the context specific question will be better predictors than questions about general values. In lieu of questions about abstract values, Beal proposes that scholars ask about specific “ontological frames.”

Although the term “ontological framing” is new to the field of moral psychology, there is a long history of similar concepts in the literature. Since the 1930s, psychologists have challenged anthropological assertions of ethical relativism by appealing to differences in how people understand and perceive meaning in the world (Duncker, 1939). For example, in his 1952 textbook, Solomon Asch appeals to “situational meaning” (377) to explain why the existence of cultural differences in infanticide is consistent with the existence of psychological universals. According to Asch, what matters for moral values is how people construe meaning in specific
contexts. More recently, scholars have argued that moral diversity can emerge from differences in “informational assumptions” (Turiel, Killen, & Helwig, 1987), differences in where people perceive vulnerability (Schein & Gray, 2018) and humanity (Haslam, 2006), differences in who is included as part of the moral community or moral sphere (Crimston, Bain, Hornsey, & Bastian, 2016; Waytz, Iyer, Young, Haidt, & Graham, 2019), and differences in who or what is seen as possessing sacred value (Fasoli, Saunders, & Andrade, 2018). Although some of the scholars just cited disagree over the structure of morality, they generally embrace moral diversity by accepting some version of “universalism without the uniformity” (Shweder, 2012). Beal’s criticism of previous moral theorizing suffers from overlooking important historical and contemporary scholarship that actually bolster his larger claim.

What I appreciate about Beal’s article is that it places these subjective perceptions at the forefront of research. He suggests that ontological frames are not simply a way of capturing moral diversity, but rather as a starting point for theorizing. Although I find the term “ontological frames,” somewhat unwieldy, Beal’s term has the benefit of avoiding the linguistic ambiguity of “value,” which can refer both to a person’s abstract moral values, and subjective perceptions of who has moral value. The term is also agnostic about what constitutes worth, allowing for moral rights to stem from harm, sanctity, or any source of value. Psychology as a field can grow by following Beal’s suggestions to move beyond broad, abstract moral values questions. Instead of asking participants to endorse abstract harm principles, researchers can examine who is vulnerable to harm (Schein & Gray, 2018). Instead of asking about the importance of sanctity, researchers can examine where sanctity can manifest in the world, examining who and what is seen as having sacred value (Fasoli, Saunders, & Andrade, 2018).
Additional Benefits of Contextualization

Throughout this paper, I have highlighted research questions that emerge from contextualizing moral psychology research. Next, I briefly focus on two specific predictions for how contextualized morality might outperform decontextualized moral questions: by improving predictions of moral behaviors, and moral change, two areas of moral psychology research in need of further research.

Judgments and Behaviors. Thus far, I have focused primarily on moral judgments, but these judgments are only one part of the tapestry of our moral lives. People also have moral motivations, and perform moral or immoral behaviors. Although there is an abundance of research on moral judgments (for a review, see Skitka & Conway, 2019), and an abundance of research on how situations impact moral behaviors (Batson, 2014; Blasi, 1983), as a field, we still have a lot to learn about how our moral judgments translate into specific moral behaviors. I predict that the relationship between moral judgments and moral behavior will be easiest to detect when we use contextualized questions over abstract value endorsements.

Initial evidence consistent with this prediction comes from competing findings from two recent whistleblowing papers, one of which found a correlation with loyalty and whistleblowing, the other which did not. Across a series of studies examining behavioral intentions to report a close or distant other to the police, Weidman et al (2019) failed to find a significant correlation between scores on the Moral Foundations Questionnaire and differences in intent to report close versus distant others. However, Dungan et al (2019) did find significant correlations between loyalty and whistleblowing intentions and behaviors. Instead of the loyalty subscale of the MFQ, Dungan et al (2019) analyzed a measure of loyalty that asks specifically what would be relevant if tomorrow they were to observe a colleague committing an act that violates safety, legal, or
ethical regulations. In their earlier work, the same research team (Waytz et al., 2013) measured concerns for loyalty by asking participants to make a force-choice selecting whether a fair and unprejudiced or loyal and faithful person has a better moral character. Unlike the decontextualized MFQ, both of these research questions contextualize loyalty, either within a specific workplace setting, or by contrasting loyalty with a competing value. Obviously, these research paradigms differ along numerous dimensions, obscuring any inferences from direct comparisons. Nonetheless, contrasting these research findings suggests that it is worthwhile for future studies to directly examine how question framing impacts the connection between moral concerns and moral behaviors.

*Moral Change.* Moral norms and moral judgments change over time. Some of that change occurs in the form of an individual or society changing their values. Upon witnessing the death of a close friend or family member, a workaholic might question their moral commitments and reprioritize personal relationships over workplace prestige. Although it is unclear how often these shifts in moral values occur, this type of evolution in moral values can be captured using decontextualized question measuring personal values (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987).

Other times, morality evolves even as abstract moral values remain steadfast. In 1776, American founding fathers declared the self-evident truth that all men are created equal. Over two centuries later, Obama started his second inaugural address by re-declaring those self-evident truths, while noting that “our journey is not complete until our wives, our mothers and daughters can earn a living equal to their efforts” and “until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law.” Obama and Jefferson embraced the same guiding moral principles, even though their views on who deserved equality, and what constituted equality differ remarkably. Abstract moral questions gauging the importance of liberty and equality
would fail to capture these evolving moral norms. As Obama concludes his address, “being true to our founding documents … does not mean we all define liberty in exactly the same way.”

Our moral judgments also shift in more momentary ways (Rhee, Schein, & Bastian, in press) when ethical considerations fade into the background (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2012). Although we might generally believe that exploitative labor practices are immoral, when we could really use a personal vacation to the Bahamas, our ethical values might fade into the background as we justify and overlook otherwise questionable behaviors (Paharia, Vohs, & Deshpandé, 2013). These momentary changes are not indicative of highly volatile values; rather the momentary changes can be understood in terms of changes in the context of the observer (Moore, Tetlock, Tanlu, & Bazerman, 2006), the existence of competing goals or values (Schweitzer, Ordóñez, & Douma, 2004), or changes in the salience of vulnerability (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997). Evaluating morality in terms of abstract, decontextualized moral values would likely overlook these momentary shifts in our morality.

**Conclusion**

Of all the topics debated in courtrooms, dining rooms, boardrooms, and bedrooms, few issues effect people more profoundly than questions of morality. Moral psychology is uniquely situated to offer concrete, theory-informed insights into topics that are compelling, relevant, and deeply personal. However, by studying judgments of name-less, gender-less, race-less, relationship-less actors, performing actions in unspecified or highly unrealistic settings, moral psychologists have overlooked broad areas of important moral concern. When scholars start leaving moral scenarios embedded in their typical contexts, they open up a world of compelling moral questions.
Work Cited


