

WHAT FEELS RIGHT

An Embodied Perspective on the Ethical Line of Development

Emily Baratta

ABSTRACT This article examines ethical frameworks across levels of human development and via the quadrants of the AQAL model. The ethical line is examined as it progresses through stages of development, paying special attention to the role of the felt sense in the determination of right action. The role of unconscious forces, particularly the felt sense of disgust, is examined as the basis of moral intuition. Integral Ethics includes the ethical framework of the previous stages and an examination of personal motivation for right action. By inquiring into the unconscious drives that move us, we may begin to recognize the cultural prejudices and excessive survival drives that can influence our determination of right action.

KEY WORDS AQAL model; embodiment; ethics; lines; morals

How does goodness arise in individuals? Although most of us would agree that what is right for one person is not necessarily right for everyone, we still sense a common good that underlies all things. An ethical line of development gives us the theoretical framework from which to take another's perspective on right action while recognizing that goodness grows through universal stages. It also allows us to reflect on our own conceptions of right action. This line may be expressed as the life question, "What should I do?" (Wilber, 2006, p. 60). A responsible application of the ethical line would not be a prescription for right action at each psychological level of development, but rather a series of markers to help us understand why people choose particular actions. Ethical philosophy echoes conventional wisdom, holding that "people are not obliged to do what, through no fault of their own, they are unable to do" (Rottschäfer, 2000, p. 260). The ethical line may offer a practical range of expectations for ethical decision-making in various populations.

Ken Wilber (2003, p. 9) proposes that the determination of right action is the result of each level's interpretation of the embodied moral intuition. In contemporary philosophy, "moral intuitions" are moral responses or judgments that "occur quickly or automatically and carry with them a strong feeling of authority" without necessarily having gone through a conscious process of reasoning (Woodward & Allman, 2007, p. 1). Moral intuition is considered "social cognition" in that it allows us to navigate the complex relationship structures of human society by assessing and predicting the behavior of others (Woodward & Allman, 2007, p. 20). Although many philosophers, notably Immanuel Kant, have recommended we purge our moral processes of emotional influence to arrive at more rational conclusions, it is becoming increasingly clear that most people primarily use reason to justify their highly emotional moral intuition (Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008, p. 3; Pizarro, 2000, p. 356). As one encounters a situation, the self-system processes wide-ranging data, including scent, intuitive feel, cultural associations, and so on. From that vast bank of information, the self-system produces a decision or an action, often unconsciously. If I am confronted with a choice between eating chicken or beetles, I will likely choose the chicken automatically, without a conscious reasoning process. Although chicken versus beetles is a simplistic example, each day is comprised of innumerable choices, the vast majority of which are imperceptible to the conscious mind. How do we arrive at these snap judgments and how are they interpreted at different levels of psychological development?

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What is Moral Intuition?

Biology, psychology, and theology have each offered explanations for moral intuition. Many religions point to a natural moral law that is embedded in human nature (Looy, 2004, p. 226). St. Thomas Aquinas held that “the natural law is a habit” and “there is in man an inclination to good” (Aquinas, 1920, p. 19), while Lao Tzu wrote that “Tao follows the laws of nature” (Lin, 2009, p. 51). Although ethical behavior includes much more than simply doing good for others, science has focused on altruism to explain goodness in humanity. Biological altruism has been explained as an evolutionarily selected behavior that increases the likelihood of genes being passed on to future generations (Rottschäfer, 2000, p. 264). This theory explains the human capacity for behaviors such as child-rearing and communal sharing; however, altruism is but one mode of human behavior and is an incomplete model of morality.

Some psychologists have suggested that moral agency is imposed on the individual by the systems in which it is embedded. For example, Freud’s superego was considered to be the internalization of social constraints, evolved to police the psyche and control impulses. For behaviorists, morality is “the result of operant conditioning by parents, peers, and society” (Rottschäfer, 2000, p. 268). Developmentalist Lawrence Kohlberg proposed that individuals advance through moral stages as a result of their environmental cues (Rottschäfer, 2000, p. 269). These theories suggest that the capacity to absorb moral codes is an inherent human characteristic. Kohlberg’s work in particular shows that although individual growth and behaviors vary based on societal pressures, the sequence in which moral capacities emerge is invariant, irreversible, and universal (Rottschäfer, 2000, p. 269). This suggests that the ethical question is intrinsic to humanity. Although these theories may explain the capacity for moral reasoning, they do not predict the everyday determination of right action by individuals. To understand daily enactment of the good, we turn toward the body itself.

Embodied Ethics

Various philosophers and researchers have proposed that moral judgment may be rooted in emotional response, among them David Hume, Antonio Damasio, and Jonathan Haidt (Looy, 2004, p. 223; Woodward & Allman, 2007, p. 2). Mood has been strongly linked to helping behavior, as even apparently arbitrary events, such as finding a dime in a pay phone, may make individuals more likely to help a stranger (Pizarro, 2000, p. 357). Although emotions in general influence our determination of right action, disgust has been singled out as instrumental in forming our moral intuition (Haidt et al., 1997, p. 116; Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008, p. 5; Looy, 2004, p. 222; Rozin et al., 2000, p. 637).

Disgust is a universal, viscerally experienced human emotion that is rooted in most mammals as a response to bitter, potentially poisonous foods (Looy, 2004, p. 223). At root, disgust is an aversion to the oral incorporation of contaminated items, which may elicit feelings of revulsion and nausea, and in extreme cases it can lead to vomiting, highlighting its role as an emotion connected to a particular physiological state (Haidt et al., 1997, p. 111; Rozin et al., 2000, p. 638). Neuroscience has linked moral intuition to the orbito-frontal, insular, and anterior cingulate cortices, which are also associated with “food ingestion and expulsion,” the processes involved in the disgust response (Woodward & Allman, 2007, p. 6). Although disgust is biologically rooted, it is primarily a social function that is entrained in children (Rozin et al., 2000, p. 646). This is demonstrated by the full disgust response being absent both in children under age five and in feral humans (Haidt et al., 1997, p. 111).

In cultures across the globe, simple disgust triggers are elaborated to include categories that extend beyond survival, including “body envelope violations, sex taboos, food taboos, animals, body products, death, hygiene, interpersonal contamination, and social disgust” (Looy, 2004, p. 223). The element of *contagion*, in which “things which have once been in contact with each other continue ever afterwards to act on each other,” shows the social nature of disgust, as disgusting elements are perceived to pass from one item to an-

other (Haidt et al., 1997). This phenomenon is most familiarly seen in the childhood game of “Cooties,” in which undesirable persons, such as members of the opposite sex, unattractive children, or adults, are viewed as contaminated with germs (Haidt, 2006, pp. 22-23). Cooties are allegedly transmitted through touch and children will go to great lengths to avoid the perceived infected parties. Of course, these magical germs are not limited to children’s play. An adult example of this would be the “contagion heuristic”—often illustrated with the example a person having an aversion to wearing Hitler’s sweater—which is one of the most potent stimuli in contamination research (Rozin, 2000). These examples show how viscerally we can experience moral contamination, even as our rational minds know there is no real danger in contracting cooties or wearing Hitler’s sweater.

The elaborated disgust response can also be related to a fear of death and consequent distancing from the body (Rozin et al., 2000, p. 642). While simple disgust triggers are useful in keeping a human group healthy enough to survive, this primordial struggle has progressed into an almost pathological fear of death, which may contribute to the seemingly unending efforts to sanitize and plasticize the modern environment (Zampitella, 2009). Studies show that reminding subjects of their mortality leads to heightened disgust responses to animals (Goldenberg et al., 2005). Indeed, psychological researcher Paul Rozin (2000) asserts, “Anything that reminds us that we are animals elicits disgust” (p. 642). To punctuate this, he points out that the only bodily fluid that does not routinely elicit disgust is tears, the only fluid unique to humans (Rozin et al., 2000, p. 642). These results indicate that the more “animal” a stimulus is, the more disgusting, whereas the more human, the less disgusting. Our largely unconscious refusal to accept death plays an important part in determining right action.

The taboos that humanity developed for survival are so deeply embedded that we feel *physically* disgusted by a wide range of triggers. If we extend our disgust at mortality to the fear of ego death, we might find that anything that threatens to pull us out of our current altitude, up or down, would produce the same sense of disgust and revulsion: the repudiatory sub-phase (Wilber, 2000, p. 51). Similarly, researchers report that disgust may serve to “guard against more subtle threats to the soul” (Haidt et al., 1997, p. 114). If the “body is a temple, housing the self or soul within,” disgust guards the purity of the body and thus the sanctity of the soul (Haidt et al., 1997, p. 114; Rozin et al., 2000). This helps to explain the use of the term *disgusting* as a synonym for *immoral* across languages and cultures, with subjects describing biologically non-threatening agents such as “racists, child abusers, [and] hypocrites” as disgusting (Rozin et al., 2000, p. 643). That sense of disgust acts as a repellant from certain actions and situations as we attempt to avoid real or imagined soul contamination. The conscious mind may arrive at a rational justification for its chosen “right” action, maneuvering around disgust to keep our identities and societal fabric intact. Again, it is important to remember that disgust is but one factor in the complex process of determining right action. This exploration of disgust is meant to show that even a deep physical sense of what is good may be highly contextual.

With emotional responses, disgust in particular, creating a physical urge toward or away from, we find a fully embodied experience of moral intuition. As Haidt and Bjorklund (2008) explain, “This conscious experience of praise or blame, including a belief in the rightness or wrongness of the act, is the moral judgment” (p. 7). Although this judgment is operating pre-consciously in our determination of right action, it is not always carried out without question. Even a strong sense of disgust can be interpreted and potentially mitigated by the will acting on behalf of the individual’s consciously held values or worldview (Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008, p. 7). We might consider the wave of attraction or repulsion felt in the body to be what a person *wants*. One would expect that this urge from the bottom up would be most influential in individually oriented levels (red, orange, and teal altitudes). In these stages, one is more likely to think that right action must come from a gut sense because perspective is more oriented toward the self. The sense of what one *should* do comes from an ideal, theoretical, collectively oriented space and likely exerts more influence on the collectively oriented levels (amber and green altitudes). Combine that felt *want* (moral intuition) with the rational *should* (con-

scious values) and you may have the equation for the actual response. With the emergence of rationality, one is able to *choose* to follow an initial moral impulse, which is partly comprised of the disgust response.

Right Action Through Levels

If emotions are raw materials for decision making, a person's worldview could be seen as the crucible. Virtually all people will have an intense visceral reaction of disgust to the strongest universal triggers, as they would to other common emotional triggers, but interpretations of those feelings vary from level to level and according to individual experience (Ekman, 2004). Although cultures form particular elaborations of the disgust response, and thereby may supply much of the content for an ethical interpretation, levels create the structure through which that sensation will be interpreted. The subjective ethical line, which Wilber terms *morality*, is inextricably linked to its outward manifestation as behavior (Wilber et al., 2008, p. 264). If we are able to view an emotional situation through the Upper-Left quadrant lens of the subject's level, we may be able to more accurately predict the subject's choice of right action in the Upper-Right quadrant. In order to do this, we will conceptualize each level's primary ethical question as follows: who, what, how, and why.¹

At egocentric red altitude, the consideration is who. *Who* is to benefit from a particular action? If the answer is not *me*, it will not be considered the right action. According to Kohlberg, self-interest is genuinely the best one can do at this stage (Crain, 1985, p. 121). Wherein at previous stages, one was driven by instinct and magical beliefs alone, at red altitude one can for the first time take action based on perceived self-interest. The danger at this stage is that everyone except me is dispensable (Wilber, 2000, p. 222).

If we overlay this perspective on bodily response to various situations, right action is generally considered to be the action that one *wants* to do. Although frequently swayed by first impulse, I am able to restrain myself to avoid punishment (Crain, 1985, p. 121). Susanne Cook-Greuter (2002) describes this as “an expedient morality” for which “actions are only bad if one is caught and punished” (p. 9). For example, at the lowest stages assault might be an acceptable course of action to deal with aberrant behavior, even in full view of a police officer. This would be less likely for those at red altitude, as one's desire to stay out of jail would outweigh the impulse to stop the offensive activity; in other words, at red altitude one of the main things that prevents following bodily impulses is a fear of punishment or hope for reward (see Kohlberg, 2008, p. 10). This might seem like the antithesis of ethical behavior, but it is an important step in laying the groundwork for higher forms of ethics.

At ethnocentric amber altitude, one is able to genuinely consider the feelings of others, taking a second-person perspective. Amber altitude is characterized by conformity to codes of conduct and living up to expectations (Crain, 1985, p. 121; Wilber, 2000, p. 49). The moral emphasis is on following the rules and fulfilling a prescribed role in the group to maintain good interpersonal relationships (Cook-Greuter, 2002, p. 13). I do not question authority because I am fully identified with that authority; to question would be to separate myself. At this stage, what one *wants* is somewhat irrelevant. In fact, this may be the level that most directly determines what one wants (moral intuition) through the imprinting of culture, in part through shared disgust triggers. Heather Looy (2004) states, “One major function of disgust is to facilitate adherence to moral laws” (p. 225). Culturally elaborated disgust triggers, such as regional food taboos, elicit companion emotions, including anger, fear, and sadness, while simple disgust triggers, such as feces, elicit only disgust (Marzillier & Davey, 2004, p. 331). This indicates that complex disgust triggers are socially embedded and reinforced; thus, social rules are internalized (Cook-Greuter, 2002; Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008; Wilber, 2008). Internalizing social rules thus begins to *override* the egocentric impulses of red altitude. Here we have an great example of amber altitude: social code imprinting is aided by operant conditioning, which heightens the innate disgust response to triggers that remind us of our mortality—with the effect being a violent reaction to serious transgressions of moral law. Indeed, psychologists warn that too much “reliance on intuition can result in a culture-bound morality” (Baron, 1995, p. 39). At this level, we *want* to do what our culture says we

should do because we are not yet able to take an objective look at the culture we are embedded in.

The transition from amber to orange altitude can be seen in Alexis de Tocqueville's (1904) explanation of enlightened self-interest: "Man serves himself in serving his fellow creatures" (p. 608). At amber altitude, I am motivated to help only those who are part of my group, an ethnocentric orientation. At rational orange altitude, one is still invested in a smoothly functioning society, but society is seen as the convergence of mutual self-interest (Crain, 1985). Life becomes a system in which we can all be winners, even if we come from different cultural backgrounds. Although great social advancements happen during this stage (e.g., the abolition of slavery), the core motivation for change is not necessarily love for my neighbor, but is likely a blanket concern for individual rights, self-interest in the objectivist vein (Wilber, 2000, p. 50). At amber altitude one is fully identified with their culture, but at orange one *chooses* to be a "contributing member" of society (Cook-Greuter, 2002, p. 19). The ability to choose membership in certain groups illustrates the third-person orientation that emerges at orange altitude. Group-oriented ideals of either a conformist (amber altitude) or collectivist nature (green altitude) will likely produce a sense of rejection, as the focus on personal agency becomes paramount (Cook-Greuter, 2002, p. 20; Wilber, 2000, p. 51). That amber and orange altitudes are also referred to as "conventional" stages is telling; they are most concerned with *what* to do, either to fit into the pack or to get ahead of it (Wilber, 2000, p. 198). The shift to postconventional ethics includes both the questions of *who* and *what*, but now adds *how*.

"How am I doing this?" could be considered the primary concern of those at green altitude. With the field of concern expanded to all life, the far-reaching effects of actions become relevant (Wilber, 2000, p. 197). At green altitude there is a new interest in "processes, relationships, and non-linear influences among variables" (Cook-Greuter, 2002, pp. 22-23). What I do may be determined good by all previous stage standards, but if how I do it interferes with hummingbird nesting patterns, for example, it will not be considered right action by those at green altitude. Again, we have switched from a *want* focus (moral intuition) to a *should* focus (conscious values). This shift may be evidenced in high social status college students' resistance to moralizing harmless disgust triggers that lower status subjects describe as disgusting (Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008). At green altitude, I *want* to have an ice cream cone, but I *should* consider that industrial dairy farms are cruel; I am considering the subjective experience of others (even cows!) when determining right action. This newfound fourth-person perspective begins to influence the bodily response, as the thought of suffering cows on a factory farm is repulsive. The danger at this stage is becoming paralyzed by the seemingly endless effects of even the smallest decision, creating a "tyranny of the minority" of sorts. Nonetheless, this stage is extremely important, especially in today's climate of corporate misconduct and scandal. By expecting companies to behave in a way that feels right, just as we would expect a person to at this level, we may have them consider how they do business, rather than simply how to make profits (Ketola, 2009). Thus, at green altitude, the effects of our actions on the entire world are taken into account when making even mundane choices, which can slow the wheels of progress to a virtual deadlock. The green climate of infinite inclusion sets the stage for us to move into a Kosmocentric ethic.

Integral Ethics

To transcend and include who, what, and how, we must ask, "Why?" Thus, a person at teal altitude begins to ask, "Why am I doing all of this anyway?" Blind spots, hidden motivations, shadow influences, and questions of a higher power all come into play at second tier. No longer can I sacrifice myself to the collective or vice versa. Robert Kegan (1994) explains that individuals at teal altitude (fifth order, in his terms) recognize "their own tendency to pretend to completeness" (p. 313). At teal altitude, I realize for the first time that I cannot have all the answers. I begin to investigate motivation for seeking "right" action in the first place. I see that while I thought my actions were good all along, especially at green altitude, the underlying motivations for my actions may have been nothing more than the interplay of my shortcomings. Why do I care about

hummingbird nesting patterns in the first place? Is it because I am miserable at work and want something else to focus on? Is it because I want to impress my eco-minded friends?

Integral Ethics requires a deep excavation of personal and cultural hypocrisies, an excavation that begins at green altitude. Only once we can see the previous stages for the first time is there the potential for “rediscovering and owning parts of the self that have previously been disowned, because they seemed too confusing or too threatening” (Cook-Greuter, 2002, p. 24). Those at teal altitude recognize that nothing is perfect and thus are less eager to cast the first stone. At teal, I have the skills to enact right action, but I realize that unless I am a clear vessel, I will not be able to determine what right action is. The ethical imperative is to continue to excavate the personal shadow to clear out *wants* (moral intuition) and continue to question the cultural shadow to clear out *shoulds* (conscious values) through “personal growth, self-actualization, and self-fulfillment” (Cook-Greuter, 2002, p. 25). This process may include directly investigating the disgust triggers and taboos that rule our physical and emotional experience, as well as doing psychological and spiritual inquiry to bring peace of mind. Cook-Greuter (2002) emphasizes the benefits of “dynamic and intimate exchange (to) gain deeper self-knowledge and wisdom” at this stage (p. 25). If one successfully integrates the values of teal altitude, one has the potential to be a “charismatic moral leader” (Cook-Greuter, 2002, p. 26). Not only will actions *make sense*, but they will also *feel* right to me and to others. A truly integral ethic should be understood by each of the prior levels that it includes.²

Unraveling Moral Disgust

As suggested above, inquiry into the shadow can be a potent tool for self-discovery and growth. Given the influence of the disgust response on moral intuition, which provides at least the basis for our determination of right action, research seems warranted on reactions that foster growth in the ethical line of development. Research shows that “people are extremely good at finding reasons for whatever they have done, are doing, or want to do in the future,” therefore it seems wise to focus our efforts of moral growth at the level of what we *want* to do, or our involuntary push/pull reactions (Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008, p. 154). Certainly, by adjusting cultural norms and systems of reward, responses would be encoded differently from the outset (i.e., parents could entrain higher levels of moral intuition in their children), but here we are concerned with what conscientious adults can do on their own to foster personal moral growth. This effort may be particularly important for advanced spiritual practitioners. Research has shown that the more in tune we are with the body’s responses, the more disgust affects our moral judgment (Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008, p. 17).

Shadow work around moral intuition could begin with a general noticing of what we find disgusting. Try making a list of things you would describe as “disgusting.” What do you notice beyond the expected—and evolutionarily useful—aversions to bodily fluids and rotten food? Are there concepts on your list (e.g., racism, jingoism, liberalism)? Are there individuals (e.g., George W. Bush, Britney Spears, Charles Manson)? Are there groups of people (hippies, pedophiles, Republicans)? Why are these concepts or people disgusting? When you think about them, how does your body feel?

The next step might be to seek out situations that you find disgusting. By deliberately entering into the experience and observing the disgust, you may find freedom around it and an ability to recognize when it is unduly influencing your decision-making. You might begin with situations that address core disgust by reminding you of your animal nature. This could be as simple as going to the zoo or as extreme as taking a tour of a morgue. How might your perspective change after spending an afternoon with a mortician? Many disgust triggers center around sexuality. For some people, just the idea of watching two men kiss could be extremely triggering. Would you feel uncomfortable stepping into a swinger’s party or a nudist colony? Which disgust reactions feel justified to you? Finally, you might come to socio-moral disgust triggers that center around politics, injustice, and anti-social behavior such as betrayal. Are you willing to watch partisan news shows with an open heart? Would you go to a rally for the “other” side of the abortion debate? By practicing enter-

ing fields that we normally avoid and learning to openly experience them, we may relax entrained disgust responses and lessen their influence on our moral judgment.

Research has shown that the more easily disgusted we are, the more afraid of death we are (Rozin, 2000, p. 642). Disgust is positively correlated with a host of unpleasant psychological states, including anxiety, obsessive-compulsiveness, depression, and eating disorders (Rozin, 2000, p. 649). Could it be that by gaining freedom in our disgust response, we are also preparing ourselves to face death? Perhaps by conquering our small aversions and gaining freedom from the fear of death, we can embrace our own humanity and embrace others.

Conclusion

Integral Ethics makes the leap from the trappings of right action to the impetus for right action itself. By the integral stage of development (teal and turquoise altitudes), my actions cannot be separated from my motivations. If my motives are unethical, it follows that my actions are unethical as well. While persons at orange altitude are able to consider an action to its logical conclusion and adjust as necessary (i.e., enlightened self-interest) and those at green altitude begin to consider the effects of their actions on others' subjective experience, individuals who have reached second tier are able to give equal weight to the Left- and Right-Hand quadrants. Ethical shadow work takes the introspection that began at green and applies it to behavior so that one can fully embody professed values.

Integral Ethics may be used as a tool to foster understanding across cultures and levels. If we can see that our moral judgment is strongly influenced by unconscious bodily forces, like the disgust response, we may begin to unravel the cultural influences that embed these motivators. Through accurate assessment of an individual's ethical line of development, we might form more realistic behavioral expectations and be able to support and challenge people as they grow. By redefining ethics as "right action" that is situational and highly personal, rather than static rules, we may help business and political leaders to live out the high ethical standards that their positions demand. Finally, those of us interested in personal and spiritual growth may find that Integral Ethics is a practical yardstick for our own development, especially to see how authentically we embody our professed values.

Finally, Integral Ethics fully appreciates the physical sensations that pull us through life. Neither suppressing nor worshipping this embodied moral intuition, the integral ethicist listens to her body's messages, including disgust, while remembering how it was encoded in the first place. This marks a shift from green altitude, which may overemphasize subjective experiences (span). On the other hand, an overemphasis on conscious reasoning may only serve to improve "people's ability to justify whatever they want to do" rather than to cultivate right action (Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008, p. 28). Perhaps moral education should take into account the influence of unconscious elements such as the disgust response in forming moral intuition and attempt to encode more ethical base-level reactions, shaping our visceral responses to situations rather than our cognition. Shadow work around the disgust response is one way to authentically move toward an integral enactment of right action. Through continued personal inquiry and spiritual practice, the felt sense would become more reliable, making an important first-person contribution to an AQAL consideration of right action.

NOTES

¹ Note that I cite Susanne Cook-Greuter's (2002) developmental work in this section. Although her work does not specifically address the ethical line, it speaks to the overall level of ego development, which may approximate our center of gravity and may generally correlate to our moral development.

²The idea of pan-level integral resonance is a subject for another article.

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