'The way we judge'
Observers' assessing of elder care decisions of adult children who had been abused by the parents and the ultimate attribution error

Claudia G. Ammann

Abstract: In this essay I want to concentrate on observers' baseline assumptions on how we should be, or should have become in order to be accounted as morally 'good.' I will point out the significance for adult children who decided to not care for their elder parents. In three selected studies I show that observers, in trying to explain the decisions of others, or their moral development, respectively moral standing, misjudge or ignore their own implicit baseline assumptions. These assumptions are symptomatic of an implicit belief in all of us that wishes to see that 'good begets good' for most of us, and infers, thereafter, that 'bad begets bad' for some who would show 'no good.' It is this implicit belief that guides the observers to make assumptions about the morally doubtful upbringing of a person, or their negative behavior that they wish to explain by flaws in the person's personality. This biased belief says "it is this way, and only this way", but, in fact, one cannot be certain about it. The baseline assumptions that observers bring along are basically the biased observer's points of view which can be explained with the ultimate attribution error.

Keywords: elder care, child abuse, dilemmatic moral decisions, an ultimate attribution error, care ethics

* Dunedin, Otago, New Zealand
e-mail: claudia.g.ammann@gmail.com

"Care for my parents? – Not me! If someone else does it, fine, I am happy. I would be happy for them. But not me. Not that. […] But how can I show that I am a good person? – I cannot!"[1],

a women in her mid 40s, a victim of physical and sexual abuse in her childhood years by her father, immediately sensing the question of elder care is not only a matter of solidarity and ambivalence alone, but also primarily an issue of morality.

The morally good member in society

Reporting about a community that put great efforts into living their lives in line with their beliefs without any outside interference, Cruz describes the 'good' member in such a community as someone who places "great value on community and considers family to be a building block of the broader group."[2] They can rely on, but also need to give care and help within the community. "Mutual aid within the group. Older children look after younger children; neighbors help each other. The goal is to live as cooperatively and as peacefully as possible."[3] This exemplifies a good, simple life emphasizing the importance of community and the good moral character within.

One may wonder what happens to those who would not adhere to these principles of mutual aid and care, as mutual aid is only given within the group but not outside.

The adherence to some basic principles indicate that everything new, everyone outside, and different to their ideal has to be rejected. The good member may not show a lack of cooperation and no pro-sociality. The good member simply has to adhere to cooperation and pro-sociality.

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[1] Woman, 46y, victim of physical and sexual abuse in childhood, about dealing with her perpetrator parents who need care and help, in an interview concerning the issue that the question of elder care, in context of solidarity and ambivalence, has to do with morality.

[1] Daniel Shank Cruz, "A Simple Life", Eve Lyons (ed.). *The New York Times*, September 15, 2018, p. 6.

[3] Ibidem, p. 7.

In this essay I concentrate on the observers' baseline assumptions on moral standing, that are assumptions about how we should be, or should become in order to be accounted as 'good.' It is our assumption about morality and how it is ideally cultivated. I will systematically and critically analyze three selected studies[4], of which two are theoretical contributions in moral psychology (see: The 'wanton' question, and: The unmoral trauma brain), and one is an empirical work at the interface of psychology and gerontology (see: Bad begets bad only), and I will point out the significance for adult children who do not care for their elder parents. We learn from the two theoretical contributions that the *moral to care* can be interpreted in a somehow extreme way. Both contributions represent extreme positions. They are extreme in relation to the issue of a morally good character, as in relation to the issue of a morally good upbringing and development. First, one position invites us to believe that a person's negative behavior (no care) can be primarily explained by a morally flawed character of that person (the 'wanton'). Secondly, with the other position we are inclined to believe that a 'morally sane' person can only develop via a happy-go-luck childhood, as a trauma can nothing but deny a moral developing (the trauma brain). And lastly, the empirical contribution interests for the reason of its interpretation of the data suggesting that a bad childhood will primarily point to an adulthood with emotionally unresolved issues, and an early trauma still active in a particular fashion some 50 years later. On example of these three selected studies I will show that, in trying to explain the decisions of others, or in trying to reason on hand of the past life-time

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[4] Searching for relevant literature that combines the criteria *trauma* (with the focus on childhood development), *care* (with the focus on elder care), and *morality*, brings to the fore the *Ethics of Care* with, however, no specific mentioning of *trauma. Care* and *morality* combined leads amongst others to the contribution analyzed in the first section (see: The 'wanton' question). *Care* and *trauma* combined leads amongst others to the contribution analyzed in the second section (see: The unmoral trauma brain). Searching for empirical data investigating the long-term effects of early trauma on the parent-child relationship, the contribution analyzed in the third section (see: Bad begets bad only) is selected for its longitudinal study signifying robust and reliable data.

experiences of others or their moral development, observers do misjudge or ignore their own implicit baseline assumptions. While doing so, the observers lose sight of the potentiality of other, alternative explanations that could contribute equally to that present day state of affairs.

All these studies show a much broader and more general implicit assumption coming to the fore. All three contributions are making a claim of 'good begetting good', either implicitly or explicit. I consider their results important to discuss, and I intend to show that their underlying assumptions, both in theoretical ideas and in empirical speculations do not necessarily hold true when tested against the logic of the argument, or the data and its explanatory power. Most importantly, these implicit baseline assumptions which observers bring along are basically the biased observer's points of view.

The 'wanton' question

Daniel Lapsley[5] from the field of moral psychology suggests that a person is not a *wanton*[6] when that person "is someone who cares about morality", referring to Harry Frankfurt's introduction of the word 'wanton' in his essay '*Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person.*'[7] Lapsley writes: "In ethical theory it is evident in Harry Frankfurt's [1971] account of what it means to be a person: A person (as opposed to a wanton) is someone who cares about morality. A person cares about the desirability of one's desires (second-order desires) and then wishes to will them all the way to action (second-order volitions)."[8]

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[5] Daniel Lapsley, "Moral Identity and Developmental Theory", *Human Development* 2015, vol. 58, no. 3, pp. 164–171, doi: 10.1159/000435926.

[6] In the following I will refer to the meaning of the term 'wanton' in the sense of Harry Frankfurt's original description: "[t]he essential characteristic of a wanton is that he does not care about his will", see: Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person", *The Journal of Philosophy* 1971, vol. 68, no. 1, p. 11.

[7] Ibidem, pp. 5–20.

[8] D. Lapsley, "Moral Identity"…, p. 164.

In accordance with the woman at the beginning asking "*can I show that I am a good person?*", the question then is: Am I accounted as a wanton when I do bad but still desire to be good? Apparently so, if I need to believe the above idea from moral psychology.

At first sight I should account myself a wanton. That is because I should have acknowledged that '*what it means to be a person*' equates with '*what it means to be moral.*' Every *moral act* equates with a human *act done by an moral being*. Every *unmoral act* equates with an inhuman *act done by a unmoral being*. Doing good means being good, and doing bad means being bad. Now, that I won't care for my elder parents, in other words I am about to do bad, means I will become, or already have been bad. I have turned into a wanton.

Because I missed "the highest level of self-understanding [that is] the moral point of view"[9], I have missed to become "the moral person." I have missed to become someone whose "very selfhood", according to Blasi[10], "is constructed on moral grounds; it is someone whose desires reflect a wholehearted commitment to morality. Morality is essential, important, and central to self-understanding."[11] Lapsley interpreted Frankfurt[12] in such a way that a wanton should be someone who does not care about morality.

However, according to Frankfurt[13] a person is 'someone who wills what he wishes to do' – and that is different to 'someone who cares about morality' as Lapsley suggests.

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[9] Ibidem.

[10] Ibidem, p. 165, referring nonspecifically to (a) Augusto Blasi, "Moral Identity: Its Role in Moral Functioning", in: William M. Kurtines, Jacob J. Gewirtz (eds), *Morality, Moral Behavior and Moral Development* (pp. 128–139), John Wiley and Sons, New York 1984; (b) A. Blasi, "The Moral Personality: Reflections for Social Science and Education", in: Marvin W. Berkowitz, Fritz Oser (eds), *Moral Education: Theory and Application* (pp. 433–443), Wiley, New York 1985; (c) A. Blasi, "Moral Character: A Psychological Approach", in: Daniel K. Lapsley, Clark Power (eds), *Character Psychology and Character Education* (pp. 67–100), University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 2005.

[11] D. Lapsley, "Moral Identity"…, p. 165.

[12] H.G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will"…, pp. 5–20.

[13] Ibidem.

Frankfurt[14] considers a wanton to be someone about whom you cannot say that this person is actually willing what he wishes for. He might will what he wishes to do, he might will not. He simply doesn't care. He just does things without considering about his will too deeply. Frankfurt: "The essential characteristic of a wanton is that he does not care about his will. His desires move him to do certain things, without its being true to him either that he wants to be moved by those desires or that he prefers to be moved by other desires. […] In any case, adult humans may be more or less wanton […when] they have no volitions of the second order, […]."[15] Frankfurt's term of a second order volition refers to what he describes as 'I want to want X' and expresses hereby a real wish; 'I express it to the outside world and indeed I really wish it.' Those who do not express this second order volition ('I really do wish') might end up as wantons.

A wanton in essence is someone who does not care a pap for it. It is all the same to him. He is someone who does not waste a single thought whether he 'really wills' what he 'wills.' If someone doesn't 'really will', in Frankfurt's logic does not do it of his own accord and of his own free will, then such a someone is a wanton. A wanton is a Johnny-Look-in-the-Air, a *good for nothing* and a scapegrace, inconsistent and untrustworthy, irresponsibly and lacking, according to Frankfurt a central element that is the second order volition. Frankfurt describes someone who wants his will to be as someone who "wants this desire to be effective"[16], meaning having volition of the second order. Today we might call this authenticity, or 'Reflektiertheit', really willing what he is willing for, and in consequence having a sense of responsibility. That person wants to want X and expressed hereby a real desire. The person shows that their desires that they externally express and declare are truly those they feel internally.

Frankfurt's wanton, however, does not want all that. The external does not match with the internal. The wanton does

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[14] Ibidem.
[15] Ibidem, p. 11.
[16] Ibidem, p. 10.

not want his will to be, does not want this desire to be effective. And this is a different concept of wanton than the one Lapsley is suggesting.

Lapsley's wanton doesn't care about morality. Frankfurt's wanton doesn't care about his will:

> So, *maybe I am not a wanton in a moral sense as Lapsley is suggesting, because that woman definitely cared about morality. And, probably I am also not a wanton in Frankfurt's sense because I show this second order volition: I want my desire to be effective when I wish not caring for my elder.*

Yet, Lapsley continued with another term that is *desirability*. He writes: "A person cares about the desirability of one's desires (second-order desires) and then wishes to will them all the way to action (second-order volitions)."[17] In short, desirability should refer to the goodness of desires in the wider, external, social round. The person needs to ask themselves 'Is it desirable to have such desires? Is it moral to have such desires?' And, 'Is it good to have such desires?' A person that is not wanting to care for their elder parents, is needing to ask themselves exactly these questions:

> *Is it good? – No! Is it moral? – No! Is it desirable? – No! And, why is it not desirable? Because the social norm tells differently. The ultimate test has become the social environment with its social norm. If they say 'No', you have to say 'No.'*

Looking at Frankfurt's essay (1971), however, a different conclusion emerges. At first sight it seems right what Lapsley concluded. Frankfurt writes:

> "What distinguishes the […] wanton from other[s…] is that he is not concerned with the desirability of his desires themselves." In such sense it could be true that desirability refers to a social round and expresses as social desires or a social norm. However, in the very next sentence Frankfurt makes explicit to what the desirability should refer to, that is the agent himself. The wanton "ignores the question of what his will is to be. Not only does he pursue whatever course of action he is most strongly inclined to pursue, but he does not care which of his inclinations

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[17] D. Lapsley, "Moral Identity"…, p. 164.

is the strongest".[18] Frankfurt's concept of desirability is a self-referral, so to speak. Desirability in Frankfurt's sense refers to someone who would not "ignore the question of what his will is to be".[19]

By contrast, Lapsley moves desirability to the external social environment the agent needs to adapt to. Lapsley makes desirability an essentially different term that is about good and bad. Frankfurt's original desirability, however, is self-driven, not externally driven and therefore something completely different. The importance here is that the power of agency is still within the agent and has not shifted to an external social desire or norm.

In Frankfurt's case the wanton has no will, no self-determination because he doesn't reflect on his desires. The wanton doesn't ask himself whether he truly desires 'his desires', as does he not ask himself whether he really wants to do X.

We witness here, in my view, a mixing up of self-determination with determination by a social environment.

What an agent's will is to be is not equal to what others' will is to be. My desires, wishes, and quests are not equal to desires, wishes, and quests of my social round that are expressed towards me, and I should then follow. It makes a huge difference whether I should be concerned about a desirability of my social environment, or one about my inner desires and my will.

Someone 'who wills what he wishes to do' as Frankfurt sees it, is not equal to someone 'who cares about morality' as Lapsley interprets Frankfurt.

So, *should I be accounted as a wanton when I do bad but still desire to be good?* Clearly not, even if in Lapsley's view you have shown no caring moral. Lapsley wanted to introduce you to such concept when you willfully doing something 'bad', or something that is different to what is generally expected – the 'good.'

Instead, you have, in fact, shown that you are someone who wills what you wish for (second order volition), and you would not have ignored the question of what your will is to be (desirability). None of this is a wanton acting. Lapsley

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[18] H.G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will"…, p. 11.
[19] Ibidem.

cannot call you a wanton. And he cannot call you someone not caring for morality. Frankfurt, however, does not answer your question whether you are still allowed to desire to be good and moral.

The unmoral trauma brain

Another contribution[20] from the field of moral education observes in our modern world worrying phenomena such as lack of cooperation and no pro-sociality. The psychologist Narvaez writes: "Today's dominant culture supports species-atypical nests and worldviews", and continues: "The [moral] underdevelopment of many persons today extends to missing capacities for relational attunement with the natural world", concluding "[a] stress-reactive individual is controlled by her conditioned past, undermining her free will [and will] have difficulty with cooperation and social fittedness, and [will] live as if among enemies."[21] The earlier writing appears to be a fair description, yet the conclusion deserves further consideration because here we witness the formation of a baseline assumption that divides 'good' from 'bad', and assumes that 'good begets good' only. But, first, let's turn to the explanation of Narvaez.

The author advocates for a moral disposition that is grounded and learned as early as possible in early childhood. She explains:

> "A childhood spent in the human nest can be termed species-typical; a childhood spent outside the nest can be termed species atypical. We know what a species-atypical upbringing does to baby monkeys. It is toxic. […] Pups with low nurturing mother care during that period never properly "turn on" the genes to control anxiety, leaving them anxious in new situations for the rest of life"[22],

and continues:

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[20] Darcia Narvaez, "Seeds of Morality Must Be Planted Rightly", *Association for Moral Education*, March 13, 2017 (unpublished presentation).

[21] Ibidem, pp. 5–6.

[22] Ibidem, p. 4.

> "If we return to moral character construction, we can see that a child whose early life provides the full nest will form a different set of implicit schemas for interacting in the social world from a child who experiences repeated and extensive stressors in early life. With a species-typical childhood, the child will develop flexible, relationally-attuned skills that allow agility in social life [whereas] [i]ndividuals undercared for in early life will display a varying set of problems depending on when the stress occurred […] and how intense or enduring they were in early life."[23]

"True «spoiling» of babies happens when the caregiver denies baby's needs and, for example, makes them scream for attention. Then babies get used to using drama to get needs met and become unpleasant people."[24] The result is a "unagile, unconfident, fragile self […] controlled by her past."[25] The author emphasizes that the formation of a moral character in the early child development is generally missing in particular in those who had not had the favor of being cared for in early life.

These children, according to Narvaez, will never become 'morally normal' persons. When early care has been missing, then no moral character can emerge or develop, not even later. We do, however, not learn why the moral disposition should start as early as in an infant brain. She states only that "learning moral dispositions starts earlier"[26] without giving an explanation of why the infant brain should be already a moral brain. The adult brain, in this view, is merely the coping of what has been engraved into, and experienced by the infant brain.

The author describes the wider implication of the neurobiological development in the infant human brain as following:

> "We would all agree that babies do not yet have moral character. But implicit systems – those that guide social perception, undergird worldview, and guide behavior throughout life – are initiated from the first days

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[23] Ibidem, p. 5.
[24] Ibidem, p. 6.
[25] Ibidem, p. 5.
[26] Ibidem, p. 3.

of life. [as] neurobiological studies are demonstrating the impact of early experience on the brain structures that form our dispositions. For example, during early life the function of the stress response system is established. With stress-inducing care the system will form in an overreactive, underreactive or erratic manner […]. When the stress response is triggered, physiology changes […]. Blood flow shifts away from higher order brain systems in order to mobilize flight or fight. The individual becomes sensitive to threat cues. The individual cannot relax or be open to others or to new ideas."[27]

She continues, that later "[s]tress-reactive individuals become threat-reactive, perceiving threat routinely, and seek to reestablish a sense of security through any means possible."[28] The result: "A stress-reactive individual is controlled by her conditioned past, undermining her free will."[29] Narvaez believes that a moral character can only be cultivated by avoiding the above neurobiological responses. This clarification, however, of an individual primarily conditioned by her past, and the absence of early care for her, reveals already the dichotomized understanding of either good or bad early childhood experiences that inevitably must lead into an either good or bad moral character formation.

What the author is, in fact, describing here is the neurobiological developing of a traumatized brain.[30] What the author, however, is claiming here is the neurobiological developing of a brain that cannot learn morality.

The unsettling insight here is the describing of the formation of no moral at hand of the neurobiological trauma reaction in an infant, without learning why moral formation should start that early, respectively without the potentiality of 'thriving against the circumstances' that we need to believe is a mere exception against the rule of 'bad begetting bad' only.

Narvaez declares with a sweeping move the traumatic neurological mechanisms as the development of a non-moral

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[27] Ibidem.

[28] Ibidem, p. 5.

[29] Ibidem.

[30] See Christine A. Courtois, Julian D. Ford, *Treating Complex Traumatic Stress Disorders: An Evidence-Based Guide*, The Guilford Press, New York–London 2009, pp. 31–59.

character. While Narvaez describes the neurobiology else-where explicitly as a trauma reaction[31], in this article '*Seeds of morality must be planted rightly*'[32] her implicit assumption become clearer. According to this view, we should believe (a) a direct analogy between trauma brain and moral brain, with (b) some apparently wider implications for adulthood.

The direct analogy between trauma brain and moral brain

The neurobiological developing that Narvaez states as fundamentally important for the formation of a moral character, while in fact describing early trauma reactions in infants and children, is in fact a declaration of a non-formation of moral. When a neurobiological development has taken place, that the author wants to have avoided, no moral formation should have occurred. When, however, no such neurobiological development took place, moral formation should occur. Through this explaining she declares the formation of the moral character through a negation, respectively an exclusion. Trauma excludes moral, and moral excludes trauma. Moral formation, herein, is the absence of trauma. And in contrast, trauma is the non-existence of a moral character. While moral development is the absence of a traumatic brain development, a traumatic brain development is the development of no moral, respectively the lack of a moral development. Trauma hinders moral development, it even denies the potentiality for morality. According to such view, a moral brain development can only take place through the absence of a traumatic brain development, and every traumatic brain development inevitably will be the opposite of a moral brain development. Such a view holds that only a happy-go-lucky childhood can guarantee a moral development, and only the opposite of trauma can become moral.

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[31] D. Narvaez, "Triune Ethics Theory and Moral Personality", in: D. Narvaez, D.K. Lapsley (eds), *Personality, Identity, and Character: Explorations in Moral Psychology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009, pp. 136–158.

[32] D. Narvaez, "Seeds of Morality"…

The apparent wider implications for adulthood

According to Narvaez, the adult brain "is controlled by her conditioned past [yet] not realiz[ing] this"[33], and has "difficulty with cooperation and social fittedness, and live[s] as if among enemies."[34] In other words, a stress-reactive individual does not possess the moral understanding and moral sensitivity necessary to become a 'good' moral member in society. In this view, trauma is eminent for the later lacking of morality and maturity in adults. The unmoral, or non-moral adult is someone who did not learn in early childhood the 'good moral' education. The non-moral adult is the one character that has not learnt in early childhood already what 'good' morality suppose to mean. If that, however, is correct, then any adult child with a traumatic childhood can be assigned as a non-moral persona. In this thinking an adult trauma brain is necessarily the one without morality, is the one that has difficulties "with cooperation and [will] live as if among enemies."[35] In this thinking the adult with a traumatic childhood experience has become the other, the unmoral person. This is what this thinking is promising. And such thought is deeply unsettling and worrisome.

A Narvaez' reader learns that 'bad' upbringing in childhood inevitably leads to 'bad' developments in adulthood. However, what the reader does not learn from Narvaez but potentially should equally be aware of is that, while 'bad' upbringing in childhood is clearly unfortunate for the later development, yet, a 'bad' upbringing does not guarantee a 'bad' development later on. The child can have developed into something good, or could have been resilient early on. Equally, it very much could be that despite a 'good' upbringing later on a 'bad' development could have occurred. 'Good' upbringing should not guarantee 'good' development later on. And equally, 'bad' upbringing should not guarantee 'bad' developmental outcome later on either. But this is exactly what the author is trying to convince us to believe.

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[33] Ibidem, p. 5.
[34] Ibidem, p. 6.
[35] Ibidem.

For one, the author's claim that a moral character can be cultivated by avoiding the above neurobiological responses, is in itself not troubling. In connection with her idea about the formation of the moral character, however, it appears highly questionable whether we can cultivate morality in people just like carrots in our gardens and they then just popping up to our liking. Morality does not work that way. Rather, the so-called moral character seems to be a secret trait, a 'Vexierspiel.' It appears where we do not expect it, and it slips and disappears where we expect it for certain. However, there are more precise definitions of morality. For example, a well reflected and trained ability to make moral decisions can replace spontaneous, intuitive, under-reflected and under-argued (or just routine powered) decisions like slow thinking that replaces (or should replace) fast thinking[36] when a moral decision maker must deal with a more demanding moral challenge.

It remains puzzling why experts in traumatology point to the specificities of severe traumatization while experts in moral education make from there more broad generalizations on morality. Explicit, why would the author choose the early traumatic neurological reactions for a generalized formation of no morality, when Courtois and Ford describe these exact same reactions as specific patterns occurring in complex psychopathologies of severe traumatic stress disorders. They write, these survivors carry into adult life a malignant "self-loathing, the deep mistrust of others, and a template for relational reenactments."[37] These trauma survivors "develop neither a consistently secure working model of caring relationships nor a positive identity or self-trust" in their adult years.[38] If following Narvaez, however, we should believe this specific, severe psychopathology is key for all abused adult children.

It is also puzzling why experts in traumatology can emphasize the positive while the author needs to stress the

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[36] See Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York 2011. See also the two layers and two aspects of moral reasoning in Georg Lind, *How To Teach Morality*, Logos, Berlin 2016.

[37] Ch.A. Courtois, J.D. Ford, *Treating Complex Traumatic Stress Disorders*…, p. xiv–xv.

[38] Ibidem, p. 4.

negative. Explicitly, why would experts in traumatology write so emphatically a manual for the road to recovery and betterment underpinned by the believe that "change in neural pathways is possible throughout the lifespan"[39], when, following Narvaez, we should believe that such an endeavor is without avail as no moral character has emerged or developed, not even later. While acknowledging that "teaching old dogs new tricks aptly captures the increasing difficulty of changing […] behavior, thinking, and emotion patterns after adolescence"[40], Courtois and Ford are equally cognizant that trauma survivors "are able and capable in their adult lives to engage in 'healthy' […] trusting and truly collaborative relationship[s]."[41] With Narvaez, however, we should hold the view that these children will never become 'morally sane' persons.

Bad begets bad only. Examining Kong and Martire's speculation

The following empirical study is one of several, investigating the potential link between childhood trauma and the later relationship with the former perpetrator parents who are now old. It is one of the more important studies as it utilizes longitudinal data. Kong and Martire examined the question "whether and how childhood maltreatment affects adults' relationship quality with aging parents and [its] subsequent implications for health and well-being."[42] I will guide through the findings and analysis and elucidate the thinking of 'bad begets bad' in which trauma is considered as inevitably leading into major psychopathologies in adulthood, even in an otherwise healthy cohort of adults.

The Wisconsin Longitudinal Study collects data from a cohort of adults who were seniors graduating from high school in Wisconsin in 1957, and were born between the years 1937 and 1940. The first data collection wave was

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[39] Ibidem, p. 34.

[40] Ibidem.

[41] Ibidem, p. 31.

[42] Jooyoung Kong, Lynn M. Martire, "Parental Childhood Maltreatment and the Later-Life Relationship with Parents", *Psychology and Aging* 2019, vol. 34, no. 7, p. 900.

conducted in 1993/4 when participants were around 53 years of age, followed by two other waves (2004/5 and 2010/11). Childhood maltreatment was measured at Wave 2 when participants were roughly 64 years of age. The relationship quality with the elder parents was measured at all three data points, as was psychological well-being of the participants. Of the original 10,317 individuals selected and approached, there were 1,479 participants at Wave 1 who still had their parents alive, 162 at Wave 2, and 13 at Wave 3.[43] Overall, at the age of 65, in retrospect "less than 15% of respondents reported maternal childhood abuse, and approximately a quarter of respondents reported paternal childhood abuse."[44] On base of these data, the authors' particular interest focused on "whether and how between-person variability in later-life relationships with parents would mediate a history of childhood maltreatment and psychological outcomes"[45], and they analyzed the connection between early childhood trauma (explicitly verbal abuse, physical abuse, and neglect), the relationship quality, and psychological well-being as well as depressive symptoms of the participants.

First, the results impress. The authors found that "adults with a history of childhood abuse showed lower levels of perceived closeness with abusive mothers and fathers compared with their nonabused counterparts"[46], and they conclude that "[t]hese results are partially consistent with [their] previous work, which showed that reports of maternal childhood abuse and neglect were concurrently associated with a lower level of affectual solidarity with aging mothers."[47] This is a particularly interesting statement as it would point to a view that says 'broken bonds cannot be repaired.' As well, it would hint to something pathological that these relationships potentially possess. Kong and Martire seem to affirm such view. They gather: "Affectual solidarity is one of the most important aspects of intergenerational solidarity […];

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[43] Ibidem, p. 904.
[44] Ibidem, p. 906.
[45] Ibidem, p. 905.
[46] Ibidem, p. 908.
[47] Ibidem.

affective sentiments in a parent–adult child relationship can enhance the psychological well-being of adult children, reduce conflicts within the relationships, and result in positive outcomes of caregiving."[48] This affirmative statement is not wrong; as a matter of fact it makes all sense: affections towards the parents help reduce conflicts. In combination with the empirical findings, however, they point to the view that any adult with a family problem (a history of childhood abuse and weak affections, or lesser closeness towards their parents) must also have a problem with intergenerational solidarity, as less affection or closeness equals less solidarity towards the elder generation. The combined statements suggest that these adult children have missed to support the intergenerational solidarity they would have ought to support. The authors come to a conclusion that mirrors this view. They namely suggest, "the key to ameliorating negative caregiving outcomes may lie in properly addressing the relationship with the perpetrating parent."[49] As they argue, "practitioners can also help these abused adults become more aware that their relationship with an abusive mother may be a source of negative psychological outcomes. These interventions can help guide abused adults to address emotionally unresolved issues with the parent."[50]

These statements indicate that abused adult children with less affection towards their older parents will not only lack the necessary solidarity towards the older generation, but also fifty-some years later after the abuse, they seem to be still deeply involved in 'emotionally unresolved issues' with their older parents. In addition, they potentially reveal 'negative caregiving outcomes' that are directly connected to their early abuse, as to their lack of affection and solidarity towards the elder generation.

Then, however, when the authors re-analyze their finding in this carefully und thoughtfully conducted analysis, the previously significant associations vanish. "For a sensitivity check, we reestimated the MSEM model using the original Likert-scale measures of childhood abuse and neglect.

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[48] Ibidem, p. 909.
[49] Ibidem, p. 910.
[50] Ibidem.

A few differences were found in the mediational associations"[51], as Kong and Martire stress. What first was a significant mediating associations "such that reports of having been verbally abused, physically abused, or neglected were associated with lower levels of psychological well-being partly through lower levels of perceived closeness with mothers."[52] turned out be insignificant when re-analysed within the original numerical condition."[53] In the relationship with mothers group, reports of having been physically abused by the mother were not significantly associated with perceived closeness with mothers at the .05 significance level[54] as they were with the dichotomized abuse measure."[55] The results suggest that the believed existence of a connection turns out to be a connection of insignificant means. There, where there should be lower closeness to the mother in connection to all three types of trauma (verbal, physical, neglect) and lower levels of well-being, was in fact not much substance to. Not being that close to the mother and personally feeling not that well seemed both to be connected, yet at the same time not to be connected to the earlier childhood abuse by the mother. The distant relationship can have other reasons, too, and not only the childhood abuse. The unwellness can be linked to the early trauma and the distantness in the relationship, it equally could potentially not be linked. The results would not tell.

Furthermore, Kong and Martire "did not find significant associations between childhood maltreatment and later relationships with a nonabusive parent"[56], or, explicitly, "[t]here were no significant associations between reports of paternal childhood abuse and the relationships with mothers, except that fathers' physical abuse was associated with less frequent contact with mothers."[57] The authors' "speculation" about that last finding "is that there might be individual

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[51] Ibidem, p. 907.

[52] "Verbal abuse: b = –0.06, p = .010; physical abuse b = –0.04, p = .020; neglect b = –0.03, p = .008", ibidem, p. 906.

[53] "Likert-scale order instead of dichotomized order in the first analysis", ibidem, p. 907.

[54] "b = –0.08, p = .088", ibidem, p. 907.

[55] Ibidem.

[56] Ibidem, p. 908.

[57] Ibidem.

differences within these parent–adult child dyads"[58], indicating again that early abuse should be deeply connected to a lack of affection and solidarity towards the elder generation, as to 'emotionally unresolved issues', and to the potentiality of 'negative caregiving outcomes.' They write: "For example, some abused adults might be more attached to the nonabusive parent, particularly if that individual was also victimized by the partner and they developed protective strategies together […]. Others may be disconnected or even enraged toward a nonabusive parent who failed to properly protect them from the abusive parent […]. Future research might explore this complexity in the relationships between previously victimized adults and the nonabusive parent."[59] This expectation may come true, it may come not, or remains speculation.

Several objections need to be made, and I will describe the problem as threefold: Firstly, the measures and their declarative or explanatory power. Secondly, the authors' implicit assumption of 'being less close' in relationship as being equal to 'low solidarity' towards the older generation. And thirdly, a further implicit assumption by the authors about unresolved emotional issues as ought to be ameliorated.

First objection. The measured 'perceived closeness' in this study, and 'affectual solidarity' from the other study, are in fact the exact same single variable that describes 'relationship quality.' These measures for the relationship quality originate from a theory that is elsewhere known as one of the means for intergenerational solidarity.[60] It measures all in all the provided and received present time support into both directions, from parents to child and from child to parents, explicitly (a) instrumental support that is doing errands, shopping, housework, repairs, or other work for/from the parent, and (b) emotional support that is giving advice, encouragement, and moral support to/from the parent.

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[58] Ibidem.

[59] Ibidem.

[60] Vern L. Bengtson, W. Andrew Achenbaum, *The Changing Contract Across Generations*, Aldine de Gruyter, New York, 1993; see also: Vern L. Bengtson, Robert E.L. Roberts, "Intergenerational Solidarity in Aging Families: An Example of Formal Theory Construction", *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 1991, vol. 53, pp. 856–870.

"Are you close to your parents?". And: "During the past month, did you give/receive advice, encouragement, or moral or emotional support to/from your parents?" If you have not answered 'yes', it could be that your observers make interpretations about the state of affair of closeness and the quality of your relationship with your parents that not necessarily should reflect your reality.

To be clear, the results of 'affectual solidarity', in conjunction with early trauma and later-life well-being, concern the ,relationship quality in late life', not the relationship quality of young children and their perpetrating parents. These results concern variables that measure the present day contact frequency, and support exchange at both instrumental and emotional level. But both, contact frequency and support exchange, serve now in late adulthood as an explainer for dysfunctional relationship dynamics earlier in life.

Looking for a more profound understanding. Kong and Martire's speculation refers to the more immediate and time-near events and interactions in the domestic violent family setting that seemed unlikely in an older, more settled relationships. An older family setting is not one with fresh wounds, but one with old, and crusted ones. To say, an 60 year old person who had experienced abuse (physical, verbal, or neglectful) some 50 years earlier at the hand of one parent would be still more attached and protective to their other, nonabusive parent, or contrarily more enraged and disconnected towards that other parent, mistakes the value of maturity, time, and learning processes during adulthood. Given the data points (less frequent contact with the mother), maybe simpler, alternative explanations could hold true that we do not know.

Martin-Joy and colleagues[61], for example, showed in a 70-year longitudinal study of a male cohort that the quality of the childhood environment, in other words the relationship quality with each parent, and the warmth and cohesion of the family was fading away into irrelevance

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[61] John S. Martin-Joy, Johanna C. Malone, Xing-Jia Cui, Pål-Ørjan Johansen, Kevin P. Hill, M. Omar Rahman, Robert J. Waldinger, George E. Vaillant, "Development of Adaptive Coping From Mid to Late Life", *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 2017, vol. 205, no. 9, pp. 685–691.

in later live after the age of 52, and its impact on coping mechanisms (defense mechanisms) diminished. They demonstrated that maturity comes with later life, at a time when the old parents seems to have no bigger relevance any more. To assume, however, that adult children in their mid 50s up into their mid 70s are still deeply involved in 'emotionally unresolved issues' with their older parents, is not supported by the data as it is not supported by the explanatory power, or declarative power of the variables.

We simply do not know whether childhood abuse is still an urgent matter in the lives of otherwise healthy adult children who had been 65 years of age on average when they gave account to their traumatic childhood (at Wave 2). We simply do not know because we did not ask them directly for that connection.

Second objection. When in fact we should believe that abused adult children in their mid 50s up into their mid 70s are still deeply involved in 'emotionally unresolved issues' with their older parents, then essentially we do so because we make the assumption that less affection with the elders is equal to less solidarity towards the elders. Accordingly, any adult with a family problem (lesser closeness or weak affections towards their parents, and a history of childhood abuse) must also have a problem with intergenerational solidarity.

Consequently, these *adult children* seem to have missed to support the intergenerational solidarity they ought to support. The unsettled reader will be inclined to think not only that earlier 'broken bonds' could never be repaired, but also need to believe that these adult children are unable to form any close relationships with their parents, and lack that level of affectual solidarity that would be necessary to hold these relationships. Any abused adult who shows less affection towards their parents will have a major problem because then these less affections do not only show that they seem to have no real interest in reducing conflicts with their older parents, but more importantly, it suggest that the adult child is, was, and remains a unforgiving, and unforgetting person. The lower levels of affectivity and closeness can be held against all those abused adults who report low affectivity as they would show lower degrees of affectual solidarity towards their elders. And this is a troubling implication.

The reason why such unsettling assumptions come to the fore is due to the implicit equalization of affection and solidarity. Less affection equals less solidarity, so the analogy. However, the statement of those being less close in their relationship towards their elder parents should *not* equal to 'low solidarity towards the elder generation.' For one thing, the statement that affectual solidarity "is one of the most important aspects of intergenerational solidarity"[62] is not wrong. It is fair to assume that affection can be understood as a building block for solidarity, in other words can foster solidarity towards the parents, and can help reduce conflicts with the parents. Yet, for another thing, the absence of affectual solidarity does not indicate the complete absence of intergenerational solidarity.

Actually, the statement of participants of being less close in their relationship towards their elder parents is only a component of the construct of intergenerational solidarity, not the equivalence of intergenerational solidarity. It seems to be vital to point to these basal facts, in particular as the authors indicated that abused adults with less affection towards their older parents not only will lack the necessary solidarity towards the older generation, they also, fifty-some years after the abuse, seem to be still deeply involved in 'emotionally unresolved issues' with their older parents.

Third objection. When the authors conclude that practitioners can help these abused adults become more aware of their psychopathological relationship with their parents which "may be a source of negative psychological outcomes [and] help guide abused adults to address emotionally unresolved issues with the parent"[63], they miss to see that in psychotherapeutic practice the patients/clients bring up these issues by themselves already if it still worries them. In an otherwise health longitudinal cohort, however, these issues may, or may not be of relevance.

Kong and Martire indicate that, fifty-some years later after the abuse, adult children seem not only still to be deeply involved in 'emotionally unresolved issues' with their older parents, but also, in addition, they potentially reveal

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[a] J. Kong, L.M. Martire, "Parental Childhood"…, p. 909.
[b] Ibidem, p. 910.

'negative caregiving outcomes' that are directly connected to their early abuse, as to their lack of affection and solidarity towards the elder generation. These statements point to a view about a distantly, uninterested adult child showing no affectual solidarity, and an apparently everlasting psychopathological dynamics in families where childhood abuse once occurring will show up again in adult children becoming the *new* perpetrator. In all fairness, the author never use the explicit words elder abuse, elder neglect, revenge, or malevolence. But their implications refer to exact these terms, and hint to the potentiality of revenge and malevolence. However, when the authors, in trying to get a holistic understanding, advocate that "[f]uture studies should empirically test this speculation [of a connect between a particular past and a particular present] by examining a history of child maltreatment, current relationship quality with aging parents, and caregiving outcomes all together in the same model"[64], they seem to be primarily of the view that a lack of care (e.g., elder neglect) can be basically explained by the direct connect to revenge and malevolence. As a matter of fact, according to the authors, the negative implications are clearly delineated for adults with a history of childhood maltreatment who continue their relationships with their aging parents. They state: "This new knowledge can serve to better understand abused adults' experience and outcomes of caregiving for the perpetrating parent."[65] No matter who to blame here, the perpetrating parent or the former child victim and now adult child, the overall 'think' about the whole situation and the persons has settled – a picture of everlasting psychopathological dynamics in families emerges where abuse once occurring, will occur time and again. The pathology of 'no contact', and 'no affection' has become a psychopathology on side of the adult children. What, in fact, is happening is that a 'childhood abuse' becomes a label for the whole rest of an adult child's life. The adult child cannot escape this label. They will be stigmatized, and will remain the traumatized, abused, and then abusing child for the rest of their life. And this is a problematic implication.

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[64] Ibidem.
[65] Ibidem.

As a conclusion, the finding of no convincing connect "between childhood maltreatment and later relationships with a nonabusive parent"[66] should be taken into consideration more seriously, because we could have witnessed here a thriving despite the circumstances. To be clear, this is no promotion of abuse of any kind. Child abuse as elder abuse are both abhorrent crimes. But we should turn to the matured victims, and recognize how they have advanced and prospered, and acknowledge their development. We should give them at least a fair chance for 'normality' (whatever normality may be), and should avoid individualization and pathologization of a problem that in late life is sometimes labelled as 'having had a bumpier start into life than others.'

Coming to peace with the old wounds, or letting the pain come 'fresh' as ever been in younger years, makes the fine line between thriving despite the circumstances and psychopathology. These old wounds will never leave an abused person, yet, the degree of deep involvement, concern and attachment to that wound makes the psychopathological moment. It can very much be that in this very important longitudinal study there are single cases who may still have such deep involvements, concern and attachment to their old wounds. However, to generalize from the single case to the whole, otherwise healthy group is, I would say, far fetched. While it is certain that all of them who experienced a childhood trauma will carry that wound with them throughout their whole life, it should be emphasized that it is equally true that not all abused children develop a psychopathology. The authors, however, come to the conclusion that "the current study further supports lifelong linkages in intergenerational relationships for adults who were maltreated as children: Dysfunctional parent– child relationships persist until late adulthood in a way that undermines the levels of perceived closeness and interactions through contact and social support exchanges with the perpetrating parent."[67] And that straightforward conclusion is a problem of an observer's implicit biases.

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[66] Ibidem, p. 908.

[67] Ibidem.

The biased baseline assumption 'good begets good'

What is a person's moral standing when observers learn about the person's decision not to care for their elders, and their history of childhood abuse, the relationship with their elder parents compromised, or broken?

It turns out an observer can become blind, and be primarily lead by biased assumptions about the social world. In there they want to believe someone not caring can only be one of those who do not belong to 'us', the people who care. They want to believe that an unfortunate upbringing does indicate nothing else but a morally flawed person lacking any moral formation. It is the observer's biased baseline assumptions that make them believe that abused adults' present day decisions can be explained primarily through the past. Yet, while that can be true, it equally can be wrong.

The observer ignores the multitude of other, alternative explanations contributing to that present day state of affair. An adult child may have good reasons to feel distant to their parents. But no matter of the reasons they may have now, or the sentiments they are inclined to feel towards their elder parents now, the observers assumes an inherent flaw in these families with a single past marking the whole rest of the adult life and the relationship quality between the generations.

To state, however, to know how a moral character is suppose to be (see: The 'wanton' question), or how the moral character suppose to develop (see the Section 'The unmoral trauma brain'), as assuming solidarity to be primarily a matter of affection towards the elders, tells more about the sender of the message then the message itself. It tells what observers specifically like to believe about the social world, and how they wish the world to be. The observers' baseline assumptions on people's moral standing can in fact evince a certain belief system (implicit bias) that says that we all ought to be caring human beings, and we all should aspire for hold 'each other.' Yet, as much as observers like to see each other as the caring bit, and as much as they like to think that there should be a social glue between humans, this thinking tells much more of a desire, and a demand towards others than a realistic describing. The baseline assumption reflects more of what observers 'desire to see' rather then what 'there is to see.'

Interestingly, these baseline assumptions feed into a more general understanding of what the English simply call 'social cohesion', or 'solidarity.' For one, these two terms are used excessively in the present times, and in effect had suffered a fair bit of overuse, so that their meaning became worn-out and scraggy, almost withered and wizened with its best days gone. '*Everybody talks about it. Nobody believes in it anymore. But everyone demands it from the other*', as one interviewee[68] put it. The almost limitless use of these two terms in present times have lead to a multitude of different meanings with the unsettling consequence of not knowing what is 'to be desired' and what 'is there' in the social world.

For another, it would be worth remembering that these terms refer to a more floccose thing of *what we think we should do towards each other in order to understand ourselves as a we.* These are believes about 'what holds the *us* together', and further 'what should be assumed as the good in people.'

The inconvenient truth is that a term with a floccose meaning can imply assumptions that are basically biased. When biased, baseline assumptions about the moral standing of each member have serious and grave consequences for anyone who is not considered as a member. In other words, having some specific believes about the social glue will also draw a demarcation line between the *us* from *them*, that is the other, the outsider of whom we believe would not be like us, and who would not do like we would do.

Such baseline assumptions are symptomatic for an implicit belief in all of us that wish to see that '*good begets good*' for most, and infers thereafter a '*bad begets bad*' for all those who would show '*no good.*' It is this implicit belief that guides the observers to make presumptions, assumptions, interpretations, and speculation about the morally doubtful upbringing of a person, their negative behavior that is explained by flaws in their personality.

The biased belief says "it is this way, and only this way". The biased belief states so but cannot be certain about whether it is truly that way.

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[68] Man, 64y, no domestic violence background, conversing on elder care in the context of solidarity and ambivalence.

The fundamental error of interpretation about the baseline assumption 'good begets good'. The ultimate attribution error

This section will advocate for the following claim: an observer's view is basically a prejudiced belief. The observer's baseline assumption is one in which they need to believe that 'good begets good' only, with only ingroup members capable and able to hold up to that aspiration. Everyone else is to be blamed as different, and belonging to the bad only. I will illustrate this belief by means of a cognitive bias called the ultimate attribution error.

Pettigrew[69] proposed the ultimate attribution error (see: correspondence bias) as an extension of the earlier known fundamental attribution error in reference to a phenomenon in which "a person who is disliked or hated may well be viewed as responsible for bad behaviors and not responsible for good ones."[70] The term describes the observers' consistent underestimations of situational pressures and overestimations of actors' personal dispositions on their behavior."[71] Granting someone different the benefit of a doubt seems difficult to do.

Delineating his work with Gordon Allport, Pettigrew described prejudiced individuals as generally attributing "positive behavior by themselves as dispositionally caused, as further evidence of their being decent, upstanding human beings. [However], the same anti-social behavior that would qualify within a social group as out-of-role will frequently be seen as in-role across social groups if it matches hostile stereotypes and expectations."[72] The ultimate attribution error concerns a whole group, not only a person as it would be with the correspondence bias. This bias goes further. It labels on a group level the sheer existence of an outsider's unwanted behavior as prototypical for a whole group.

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[69] Thomas F. Pettigrew, "The Ultimate Attribution Error: Extending Allport's Cognitive Analysis of Prejudice", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 1979, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 461–476.

[70] Ibidem, p. 464. Quoting Shelley E. Taylor, Judith H. Koivumaki, "The Perception of Self and Others: Acquaintanceship, Affect, and Actor-Observer Differences", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1976, vol. 33, pp. 403–408.

[71] Ibidem, p. 464.

[72] Ibidem, p. 465.

Pettigrew's describing brings to mind that the outgroup typifies the outsider who does not know anything about internal habits, rites, or could share the historical experience. The other is the stranger who does not belong to the *us*. For instance, anyone who is unlike the *we, the carers* can fall into the category of *them, the uncaring people*.

The ultimate attribution error is twofold in its explaining for prejudiced observing of (a) negative acts by an outgroup member, and (b) positive acts by an outgroup member. Below, both negative and positive act will be examined in detail.

The ultimate attribution error for negative events and the insufficient care as a moral problem

The error for negative events occurs "when prejudiced people perceive what they regard as a negative act by an outgroup member, they will [then] more than others attribute it dispositionally, often as genetically determined, (in comparison to the same act by an ingroup member)."[73] Anyone who does not 'do' the care is type-casted as a typical characteristic of a no caring personality. Pettigrew put it this way: "For acts perceived as negative (antisocial or undesirable), behavior will be attributed to personal, dispositional causes. often these internal causes will be seen as innate characteristics, and role requirements will be overlooked."[74] Then, someone deciding not to care because of their experienced childhood abuse, will, in the eye of the observer, not only show a negative, unwanted, and disliked behavior, but also exemplifies that abuse is still part of their personality. In effect, that person will be considered a noncaring personality, and as someone who is a revengeful, abusive, and egoistic ignoramus. Doing has become being.

On the group level consideration, this bias predicts that not only those who simply *do* not care for the reason of their trauma, but also finally all those who would *be* just known for their trauma; as belonging to the group of trauma equals belonging to the group of non caring, abusive, or revengeful

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[73] Ibidem, p. 461.
[74] Ibidem, p. 469.

personalities. According to this erroneous bias, the uncaring character refers also to all others with a traumatic past, as they also need to be identified as carrying the potentiality to not care. Then, the ones with the happy-go-lucky childhood can distinguish the *us* from *them* who are unlike *us who do care*. In effect not some, but all with a certain mark will be labelled and held accountable for their bad character. Belonging to a group as sharing a certain characteristic with others (e.g., the experiences of a traumatic childhood) becomes a label for doing. Being has become doing.

The ultimate attribution error gives reason to believe that whatever an outgroup member is capable of doing, everything and everyone belonging to that kind needs to be cast as *persona non grata*. In this belief, all who belong to *us* are suppose to be members of the 'good guys' and all those who act differently, belief differently, have different reasons for their acts would not only not belong anymore to *us*, but to *them* now, the 'bad' guys. When a person's negative behavior is explained primarily through their supposedly flawed personality, it seems inevitable to assume that a decision to not care showed primarily a morally flawed wanton person[75], or a bad childhood inevitably results in a bad adulthood only[76], respectively a bad childhood as pointing to an adulthood of emotionally unresolved issues only, and the abuse as still an active part in their personality.[77]

When suggesting that "[t]he goal of moral identity development, on the standard account, is the integration of self and morality; it is the integration of values with motivational and emotional systems"[78], then there is no other way than to believe "the two developmental tracks [of self and morality] are ideally conjoin[ing]."[79] Such development would suffice the view of the moral person although it does not make an exhaustive approach to the moral person. When "the highest level of self-understanding implicates a moral point of view"[80],

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[75] D. Lapsley, "Moral Identity…".
[76] D. Narvaez, "Seeds of Morality…".
[77] J. Kong, L.M. Martire, "Parental Childhood…".
[78] D. Lapsley, "Moral Identity…".
[79] Ibidem, p. 164.
[80] Ibidem.

morality then can only demonstrate itself through a morally good behavior which can be illustrated by the 'competent care' in terms of Joan Tronto.[81] According to this scholar, "<u>competence is the moral dimension of caregiving</u>. Incompetent care is not only a technical problem, but a moral one."[82] In this view any subjectively (i.e., intentionally caused by a carer) insufficient care would be a moral problem, and anyone who does not care in a competent fashion is the 'morally bad' one who shows no integration of morality and self. Strictly, they have missed to integrate their motivation and emotions into a coherent value system as their motives and emotions had directed them to others decisions than the morally good decision. Their motives, emotions, and moral value system should have been one.

This is the way observer wants to see and evaluate a person not caring: these persons do not show the moral proper act. That person's self and morality need to be assumed as dissonant, and their values, motives, and emotions out of sync.

'A person who has not experienced enough love and care early on, will become unable to be loving and caring for the rest of their lives.' This is the view of an observer who commits the ultimate attribution error. It is, however, the wishful thinking of the observer to see a self with values, motivation, and emotions in sync with morals, and a care decision revealing a moral character.

Equally, the analogy of a bad upbringing in childhood as inevitably leading to a bad adulthood reflects also the attribution error. A traumatized brain is to believed the non-moral brain that lacks moral. It will never, or has never learnt to be moral. The traumatized brain is unfree and inevitably leading to an adult brain incapacitated, or free of morality. The prejudiced belief says a trauma brain (or a trauma mind) cannot develop morality.[83]

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[81] Joan Tronto, "Ethics of Care", in: Martha B. Holstein, Phyllis B. Mitzen (eds), *Ethics in Community-Based Elder Care*, Springer, New York 2001.

[82] Ibidem, p. 63.

[83] See Michael Gazzaniga who claims our brains can be ethical, *The Ethical Brain: The Science of Our Moral Dilemmas*, Harper Perennial, New York–London–Toronto–Sydney 2006.

This thinking reveals an implicit bias that says: 'good begets good' only, and 'bad begets bad' only. It assumes that 'good' is distinctively divided from 'bad' and can never coincide. 'Good' can never emerge out of 'bad', and 'bad' should never emerge out of 'good', not even time-delayed, for example the one in childhood, and the other later in adulthood years. Under such view, 'good' cannot coincide with 'bad' in a single life of a moral person. However, a moral mind does not tick as simply as the classical bivalent logic or according to the causative relationships.

But for a biased observer certain events simply cannot occur. For example, an identity that has developed from victim to survivor, and a morality that still (or again) can include the good, is unthinkable for an observer who is in the thick of his/her ultimate attribution error. Such an identity and morality cannot exist in the observer's eye because a noncaring adult child hasn't done the moral development properly as she or he is not patching on the expectations of another moral agents including the observer.[84]

Any alternative imagined would be quite unsettling for the observer, as this would contravene their assuming completely. For the observer there is only one way of thinking: Survivors cannot become different to what they were before – that is being in the midst of violence, abuse, and obsession. The survivor, in the observer's view, can only be the predetermined initial victim within a cycle-of-violence that can only turn into a perpetrator who is repeating that cycle-of-violence, or at best remain the victim. Any alternative thinking seems unthinkable:

The observer will want to need to condemn the very act, the person, and their moral personality. That is the ultimate attribution error for the present day elder care question.

Jean-Paul Sartre would have put it this way: "L'enfer, c'est les autres" (the hell, that is always the other).

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[84] Compare "avoiding expectations" in Gregory F. Mellema, *The Expectations of Morality*, Rodopi, Amsterdam–New York 2004, p. 39.

The ultimate attribution error for positive events

The abused woman at the beginning asked, "*can I show I am a good person?*" Was she right when she answered no, "*I cannot!*"?

The error for positive events occurs "when prejudiced people perceive what they regard as a positive act by an outgroup member, they will more than others attribute it (in comparison to the act by an ingroup member) to one or more of the following: (a) the 'exceptional case', (b) luck or special advantage, (c) high motivation and effort, and (d) manipulable situational context."[85]

The manipulable situational context. Two cognitive (or socioepistemic) errors can occur here. First, the error to assume that an abused adult should be in the position of being able to care for their former perpetrators in a good way. Yet, nobody would be able to define for them what that could possibly mean. They just need to show it, and observers need to see it. Only then a judgement can be made. What the observer does not see, cannot be categorized as good per see by the observer. They need to see it with their own eyes. Pettigrew in his original defining described "[a]n outgroup member's positive act […] not as a function of effort but as a consequence of situational factors at least partly influenced by others. '*What could that cheap Scot do but pay the whole check once everybody stopped talking and looked at him*'."[86] Here, an observer would say: "*Look, what else should he do than care once everybody knows where he is coming from?*" It is that observer who believes that only through their surveillance the good care can be guaranteed.

The second error under a manipulable situational context is the thinking that the abused adult child deciding not to care is capable of being a 'good' person only because the observer has granted them that favor, or, in other words, only because of the observers' goodness, grace, generosity and nobleness. They'd believe: '*I will think good about you because I am a good person at heart.*' The acting person, however, can never acquire such good. They remain what they

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[85] T.F. Pettigrew, "The Ultimate Attribution Error"…, p. 461.
[86] Ibidem, p. 468.

had been before – the bad coming from the bad. The situational context granted is one of only temporary means, the advantage will last only as long as the observer is motivated by her goodwill.

The special advantage. When attributing a special advantage to an acting person, this person "is seen as having behaved positively and achieved a stereotype-breaking result, because the actor had the benefit of a special advantage conferred by virtue of the outgroup status."[87] Pettigrew details cases of this category as following: "Black Americans have traditionally explained away positive behaviors and outcomes of white American in this manner. But the generality of the phenomenon is suggested by the recent vehemence of many whites, including many who label themselves ‚liberals,' against affirmative action programs for minorities."[88] In this thinking the abused adult child who decides to care for other some elders (but not their own) is believed to be allowed to state so only because of their 'benefit' of their status of a victim. "*They can say so only because of that abuse.*" The observer may even believe these abused adults get a special advantage of not needing to care for their elders, and observe it as a privilege conferred by virtue of their victim status. The special advantage granted is also one of only temporary means, as the advantage will last only as long as the abused adult is in fact caring for someone. If they stop caring, observers then can say: "*Oh, that's typical!*"

The exceptional case and luck. The sheer luck attribution assumes that "[t]he positive outgroup act can be seen as beyond the control of either the attributor or the actor and therefore of little significance. '*He's dumb like the rest of his group, but he won anyway out of sheer luck*'."[89] The observer will not attribute any intrinsic good motivation to the good behavior of the adult child they believe as outcast. They would state exactly so: "*He just got lucky and didn't get caught in doing the bad thing.*" In this view it is simply not allowed to envision an abused adult as having grown up to a loving, and caring being – if they had, they can only be

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[87] Ibidem.

[88] Ibidem.

[89] Ibidem.

accounted as an exception to the rule, or the 'lucky ones.' A no-care decision by an adult child should reveal the morally flawed person with values and emotions out of sync only. Yet, in fact, it is the sole wishful thinking of the observer, or their liking to think that way.

High motivation and effort. When "[o]utgroup members who work hard at being anti-stereotypical in their behavior are not seen as intrinsically exceptional, since they are perceived to be responding positively to aspects of the interaction under some control of others. They are not viewed as true exceptions, for they would return to their 'true', stereotypical state were it not for their keen motivation. [The] striving outgroup members are important exemplars for prejudiced individuals to point to as 'proof' that discrimination and other situational factors are not responsible for negative behaviors and outcomes of the outgroup. *'They made it, didn't they? So there must be something personally wrong with the rest of them'*."[90]. An observer would make such prejudiced assumption when stating exactly that "*Well, even if … I am not so sure about the rest of them*".

The voice of the women comes to mind when she was asking "*But how can I show that I am a good person? – I cannot!*" Probably Pettigrew would agree with her.

Consequential dynamics

Within 'high motivation and effort' two dynamics occur, one with the observes, the other with other abused adults.

The one dynamic concerns observers' expectation that turn out to be too high. Expecting the morally good primarily, and being not aware of their ultimate attribution error (ingroup-outgroup thinking), observers falsely deny moral integrity to those who would not show a morally good behavior (error of negative events). In then observing 'high motivation and effort' in some while needing to adhere to their belief of the 'bad' in the many (error of positive events), observers will need to arrive at the expectation that 'motivation and effort' should be clearly visible to them, as

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[90] Ibidem.

"[t]he striving outgroup members are […] 'proof' that discrimination and other situational factors are not responsible for negative behaviors and outcomes of the outgroup."[91]

It's not the circumstance that makes them do this way (situational factors of not caring). It's not because we blame them (discrimination of not caring). It's *them* that makes them do this way (the ultimate attribution error of not caring). Therefore, all those who show 'high motivation and effort' need to be watched carefully: Good behavior needs to become best behavior (though, as Voltaire puts it: "the best is the enemy of the good"). As a consequential dynamic, observers can be inclined to believe that they are allowed to expect the best from those who showed 'motivation and effort.'

The 'inside-good-outside-bad' will demand from everyone who wants to become an ingroup member a 'beyond-good' behavior, a behavior that is supreme and excellent, and stands out unparalleled to any other behavior. In the eyes of the watchful observers they should be able to show the 'good' consistently over time and space. They need to show it in every situation, with every person, at any time. They need to show the 'best' in order to be qualified as the ordinary, or the 'good.' What suppose to be evaluated in the end as 'normal and good' caring behavior, should present itself in the exuberance, the better and the best. The morally good behavior should be 'more' of the good, 'more' and 'better' than expected, outstanding, excel, and shine. In effect, it should exemplify that the person has transformed, changed, and undergone a metamorphosis. This, however, is an oxymoron.

The dynamic in the observers' expectation reveals their implicit error of interpretation about the moral development of the abused adult that should mirror the moral development of the 'normal.' The observer, in expecting the good 'as usual', is in fact calling for the good 'as never seen before.' Not only is that expectation clearly unrealistic, it exemplifies the dynamic within observers' ultimate attribution error.

Another dynamic concerns other abused adults who don't want to be stereotyped either, or don't want to lose their moral reputation. In reaction to the attributing of 'high motivation and effort', other abused adults will realize

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[91] Ibidem.

the following: they either (1) have to excel in the caring task, or (2) they need to keep their childhood abuse secret. In detail:

(1) Other abused adults witness that observers have attributed an abused adult as not being a morally good person because he/she has missed to show the morally good behavior. The moral integrity was denied to someone like them, once they are identified as abused adult children. And they realize that only 'keen motivation', in other words the outstanding, group-untypical behavior, can bring back their moral integrity. They realize further, it is then not the adequate, caring behavior towards their elders, but the supreme and excelling of good care that will suffice.

As much as this realization of needing to evince the extraordinary is reflecting an intrapersonal dynamic, it equally reflects a social interaction. If abused adults want to demonstrate that they belong to the group of morally good people, they need to go the 'extra mile.' This is the dynamic of a false observer's expectation of '*doing good is being good.*' Otherwise they will lose their moral reputation which their social environment (the observers) made quite clear to them. This is the dynamic of the false observer's expectation of '*same old, same old.*'

(2) In reaction, abused adults might discern the observers' expectations towards them as unrealizable. In consequence, abused adults might be prone to hide their adverse childhood experience now as adults before an observant social environment, as they would not know how to realistically satisfy observers' expectations (see also: congruence bias).

Conclusions

I showed on example of three selected studies that observers, in trying to understand participant's decisions, and reasoning of their past life-time experiences (e.g., childhood abuse), or their moral integrity (e.g., personality and character), misjudge or ignore their own biased baseline assumptions. The observer mistakes their speculations as real interpretations, that when tested against the logic of the argument, or the data and its explanatory power do

not hold true. Their speculations are in fact fundamental part of their personal implicit assumptions that make their baseline assumption, that is the believing of 'good begets good' belongs to people of their same kind primarily, but 'bad begets bad' belongs only to those who are not of their kind. While doing so, the observers miss to consider other alternative explanations that contributes to that present day state of affair, and they lose sight of the potentiality that a bad childhood does not determine inevitably a bad present adulthood.

Considering someone not living up to their responsibilities assumes a certain belief system in those who make these considerations. Observers who consider such speculations have some implicit baseline assumptions (biases) that grounds their speculations and interpretations on the observed person, and their inner and wider social context that is family and community. Here I showed that the implicit baseline assumption concerns the caring human being and occurs whenever interpretations want to be made about a personal past, or the personal moral upbringing. The implicit belief holds true that we all care, respectively suppose to care if need there be.

These baseline assumptions, however, shows that we only like to believe that we all care – yet, we cannot be certain about that. We rather like to envision this belief as a normative statement, yet we cannot be sure about that either. Normative beliefs can change pretty fast. When Harry Frankfurt[92] made his statement of what it means to be a person half a century ago in the early 1970s there was merely the talk about morality and the caring human being, but primarily the talk about experience and responsibility. What the cognitive bias, however, can remind us of, is that we only wish to see, yet can never be certain about whether we see in fact a morally good character.

One only may wish to see proven that there are basically morally good people and their affectual solidarity towards their parents when our underlying assumption is 'all will care' (Section: Bad begets bad). It is our biased believe to like to see 'all are good who care' (Section: The wanton question).

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[92] H.G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will…".

We also only wish to see a good moral development when suggesting that 'we are all caring people because we had been cared for' (Section: The unmoral trauma brain).

Any observer, who perseveres the belief of morally flawed personalities and morally doubtful upbringings, forgets their arguing is also potentially based on their prejudiced beliefs. The observer's baseline assumption is one in which they want to believe that 'good begets good' with only ingroup members capable and able to hold up to that aspiration, and everyone else can be blamed as different, and 'bad.' But it is not an absolute one. As long as data had not corrupted the researchers, and showed that suddenly all people turned out to have become bad, one may continue in believing in the 'good.' But this assumption can also be a mere illusion, and the blurred, biased vision of those who observe others.

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