



# Moral perfectionism and moral values, virtues, and judgments: A preliminary investigation



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## ABSTRACT

Moral perfectionism has a long tradition in philosophical inquiry, but so far has been ignored in psychological research. This article presents a first psychological investigation of moral perfectionism exploring its relationships with moral values, virtues, and judgments. In three studies, 539 university students responded to items of the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost et al., 1990) adapted to measure personal moral standards (PMS) and concern over moral mistakes (CMM) and completed measures of moral values, virtues, and forgiveness, gratitude, and wrong behavior judgments. When partial correlations were computed controlling for the overlap between PMS and CMM, PMS showed positive correlations with moral values, virtues, reciprocal helping, forgiveness, and condemnation of wrong behaviors. In contrast, CMM showed a positive correlation only with indebtedness and a negative correlation with self-reliance. The present findings, while preliminary, suggest that moral perfectionism is a personality characteristic that may help explain individual differences in moral values, virtues, and judgments.

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## 1. Introduction

Moral perfectionism is an important topic in philosophy that is usually linked to the search for high moral standards and the effort to achieve a truly meaningful life. For example, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle who lived from 384 to 322 BC argued that a good life consisted of moral and intellectual virtues, and that moral virtue was the disposition to behave in the right manner (Aristotle, n.d./1980). In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant (1788/1997) asserted that the highest good of humanity was complete moral virtue and complete happiness, with the former being the condition to deserve the latter. Relatedly, the relationship of moral perfectionism with moral judgment has been discussed in moral philosophy from the end of the 19th century. For example, Dewey held that moral perfectionism influenced moral judgment by searching for permanent, universal, and rational foundations (see Mougán, 2009). Furthermore, Cavell was convinced that moral perfectionism provided reasons for moral judgments (see Falomi, 2010, for a review). In sum, there is a long tradition in philosophy linking moral perfectionism to key aspects of morality such as

moral values, virtues, and judgments. In contrast, psychological research—while making great progress in the understanding of general perfectionism in the past 25 years (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991)—has so far ignored moral perfectionism. Consequently, no empirical study has yet examined whether moral perfectionism is actually associated with moral values, virtues, and judgments.

### 1.1. Perfectionism dimensions and domains

Perfectionism is a personality disposition characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting exceedingly high standards of performance accompanied by overly critical evaluations of one's behavior (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Consequently, perfectionism is best conceptualized as a multidimensional personality disposition. Factor analyses comparing various measures of multidimensional perfectionism have found two superordinate dimensions of perfectionism that are referred to as personal standards perfectionism and evaluative concerns perfectionism (Dunkley, Blankstein, Halsall, Williams, & Winkworth, 2000). Personal standards perfectionism captures perfectionists' exceedingly high standards of performance and striving for perfection. In contrast, evaluative concerns perfectionism captures perfectionists' concern over mistakes and fear of negative evaluations if they fail to live up to their perfectionistic standards. The differentiation of

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the two dimensions is important. Whereas evaluative concerns perfectionism has been associated with negative characteristics, processes, and outcomes (e.g., neuroticism, maladaptive coping, negative affect), personal standards perfectionism has been associated with positive characteristics, processes, and outcomes (e.g., conscientiousness, adaptive coping, positive affect), particularly when statistical analyses control for the overlap with evaluative concerns perfectionism, for example, by means of partial correlations (see [Stoeber & Otto, 2006](#), for a review).

Whereas earlier research established that perfectionism mainly affects people's work or, in the case of students, their academic studies ([Slaney & Ashby, 1996](#)), there is growing evidence that few perfectionists are perfectionistic in all domains of their lives ([Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009](#)). Instead, perfectionism is often domain-specific ([Dunn, Gotwals, & Causgrove Dunn, 2005](#); [McArdle, 2010](#)). Moreover, domain-specific measures of perfectionism appear to be better predictors of domain-specific characteristics, processes, and outcomes than general measures of perfectionism (e.g., [Dunn, Craft, Causgrove Dunn, & Gotwals, 2011](#)). Consequently, researchers have begun to use domain-specific measures of multidimensional perfectionism when examining how perfectionism relates to specific domains of peoples' lives such as sports, parenting, sexuality, and physical appearance ([Dunn et al., 2011](#); [Snell, Overbey, & Brewer, 2005](#); [Stoeber, Harvey, Almeida, & Lyons, 2013](#); [Yang & Stoeber, 2012](#)).

### 1.2. Moral perfectionism

Following these recent developments, we see moral perfectionism as a domain-specific form of perfectionism specifically related to the domain of morality. Moreover, we propose that—like general perfectionism—moral perfectionism should comprise two superordinate dimensions: one dimension capturing perfectionist personal standards regarding morality, and one dimension capturing perfectionist evaluation concerns regarding morality. Finally, in line with philosophical theory on moral perfectionism asserting that moral perfectionism is related to moral values, virtues, and judgments, we expect that moral perfectionism should show significant relationships with moral values, virtues, and judgments.

Whereas there are no psychological studies examining how moral perfectionism is related to moral values, virtues, and judgments, there are three studies examining general perfectionism: one study examining goals including the goal to behave in a perfectly moral and ethical fashion ([Flett, Sawatzky, & Hewitt, 1995](#)), one study examining moral judgments ([Agerström, Möller, & Archer, 2006](#)), and one examining virtues ([Mu, 2011](#)). Findings were mixed. [Flett et al. \(1995\)](#), using two different multidimensional measures of perfectionism, did not find any aspects of perfectionism to show significant correlations with commitment to the goal to behave in a perfectly moral and ethical fashion, except for one aspect closely related to personal standards perfectionism: Organization (i.e., being organized and orderly) showed a small positive correlation with goal commitment to behave in a perfectly moral and ethical fashion. [Agerström et al. \(2006\)](#), using a multidimensional perfectionism scale to measure perfectionism, but computing an overall perfectionism score combining the different dimensions of perfectionism, did not find any significant relationships between perfectionism and moral judgments measured with two vignettes presenting participants with moral dilemmas. In contrast, [Mu \(2011\)](#), using the perfectionism subscale of the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire ([Cattell, Eber, & Tatsuoka, 1970](#)) to measure perfectionism, found perfectionism to show significant positive correlations with four of the five virtues captured by the Virtue Adjectives Rating Scale ([Mu & Gu, 2010](#)), namely diligence, resourcefulness, self-reliance, and serenity (cf. Section 2.2.3).

### 1.3. The present research

Against this background, the aim of the present research was to provide a first investigation of how moral perfectionism is related to moral values, virtues, and judgments differentiating personal standards and evaluative concerns dimensions of moral perfectionism. Moreover, we aimed to investigate different moral judgments regarding forgiveness, gratitude, and wrong behaviors. To this aim, three studies were conducted with overall 539 Chinese university students who completed items of the Chinese version of the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale ([Frost et al., 1990](#)) adapted to measure personal moral standards (PMS) and concern over moral mistakes (CMM) capturing the personal standards and evaluative concerns dimensions of perfectionism. In line with previous findings that personal standards perfectionism is associated with positive characteristics, processes, and outcomes, we expected PMS to show significant positive correlations with moral values, virtues, and judgments, particularly when the overlap with CMM was controlled for (cf. [Stoeber & Otto, 2006](#)). In contrast, we did not have clear expectations regarding CMM. Hence the analyses regarding CMM were mostly exploratory.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

A sample of 539 students, studying at a large university in the eastern coastal region of the People's Republic of China, was recruited after classes for participation in the three studies detailed below: Study 1 ( $N = 168$ ; 69 male, 90 female, 9 with no gender indicated), Study 2 ( $N = 206$ ; 91 male, 115 female), and Study 3 ( $N = 165$ ; 73 male, 89 female, 3 with no gender indicated). Students were on average 20.2 years old ( $SD = 1.8$ ), volunteered to participate in the studies without compensation, and completed paper-and-pencil versions of the measures. All students completed the measure of moral perfectionism. In addition, they completed measures of moral values (Study 1), virtues (Study 2), and forgiveness, gratitude, and wrong behavior judgments (Study 3).

### 2.2. Measures<sup>1</sup>

#### 2.2.1. Moral perfectionism

To measure moral perfectionism, we adapted the 12 items of Chinese version of the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS; [Frost et al., 1990](#); Chinese FMPS: [Zi & Zhou, 2006](#); see also [Yang, 2007](#)) that measured personal standards and concern over mistakes following procedures established in previous research for adapting FMPS items to capture domain-specific perfectionism (e.g., [McArdle, 2010](#)). The 5 items (Items 4, 12, 19, 24, and 30) from the Chinese FMPS personal standards subscale were adapted to measure personal moral standards (PMS; e.g., "If I do not set the highest moral standards for myself, I am likely to end up a second-rate person"), and the 7 items from the Chinese FMPS concern over mistakes subscale (Items 9, 13, 14, 18, 21, 23, and 25) were adapted to measure concern over moral mistakes (CMM; e.g., "People will probably think less of me if I make a moral mistake").<sup>2</sup> Participants were told that the items reflected statements about personal characteristics and traits of morality and asked to indicate to what extent they agreed with the statements responding on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

<sup>1</sup> An English translation of the items comprising the measures described in Sections 2.2.2, 2.2.3, and 2.2.6 is available online as supplementary material.

<sup>2</sup> Differently from the original FMPS which has 7 personal standards and 9 concern over mistakes items, the Chinese FMPS has only 5 and 7 items, respectively.

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