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Essay 3.2

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Motivation

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C3.2P1

We are constantly bombarded by books, blogs, videos, and other self-help resources produced by “motivational gurus,” which promise to teach us how to increase our motivation to achieve our daily and long-term goals. The assumption in many domains of our life (schools, work, sport, etc.) is that the more motivated we are, the better outcomes we will secure in terms of performance, community relationships, and well-being/health. In many cases this is true, but is higher motivation always desirable? After all, we know that some of the biggest crimes in the history of mankind were committed by highly motivated individuals. In this essay, I differentiate between quantity and quality of motivation and explain why a high quantity of motivation matters only as long as the quality of the motivation is also high (i.e., it is “good,” as opposed to “bad” or “ugly”).

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The question of whether there are good and bad types of motivation has been addressed by a number of theories and models in the field of psychology. In this brief essay, I focus on the answers provided by a prominent theory of motivational psychology: *self-determination theory* (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Researchers using this theory have differentiated between optimal and dysfunctional motivational variables at the level of the individual and at the level of the social environment.

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Motivation at the Personal Level

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Motivational Regulations

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With regard to the individual level, in the SDT literature personal motivation has been conceptualized and measured in terms of a number of different types of motivation, called “motivational regulations.” These regulations represent different reasons that someone wants to engage (or avoid engaging) in a particular behavior. Some of these regulations are “good,” because they reflect motivation resulting from feelings of fun and personal curiosity, beliefs that a behavior represents a core aspect of one’s identity, or because the behavior has beneficial consequences. For instance, someone might play recreational basketball because they love the sport, or because they view themselves as “exercisers,” or because they value the personal and social benefits of the sport. These types of motivation are distinct, but they are all considered “good,” because they reflect motivation based on personal will and full

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endorsement of the behavior. In some cases, some types of “good” motivation are better than others, depending on the nature of the behavior. For instance, not many beginner exercisers might enjoy running on a treadmill, but it is the personal value of the behavior that will keep them on the treadmill! Despite their differences, all aforementioned “good” types of motivation (which are collectively labeled *autonomous motivation*) result in better emotional experiences, more adaptive cognitions (e.g., concentration, coping responses), better interpersonal relationships, and more persistence with and attainment of important personal or group goals (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

C3.2P4 In the SDT literature, some “bad” and “ugly” types of personal motivation (which are collectively labeled *controlled motivation*) have also been measured. For instance, people might be motivated to adopt a behavior because it helps them not to feel guilty (e.g., attending religious services), or because it enhances their ego (e.g., looking competent in the eyes of others), or because they are promised a reward to engage in the behavior (e.g., money to lose weight). Although people motivated by such reasons might persist in the short term, over time these types of motivation are “bad” as they reflect internal pressures or external control. People will eventually give up on the behavior if they are motivated solely by such reasons and, while engaging in the behavior, chances are that they will feel unhappy, distracted, or preoccupied by how they appear to others (Ntoumanis et al., 2020). Motivation can also be “ugly”; we often witness people who are being “motivated” by threats, fear of or actual punishment. This type of motivation is universally counterproductive as it completely undermines peoples’ psychological needs, and it results in passive compliance and significant costs in terms of psychological accommodations and human functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

C3.2P5 Although we can identify and measure different types of motivation, the reality is that many behaviors in our lives are underpinned by several motives. For instance, our motivation to work could be based on “good” (e.g., “I enjoy learning new skills”), bad (e.g., “I like the kudos this job gives me”), or ugly motives (e.g., “My spouse has threatened to leave me if I quit my job”), the quantity of which can vary. Hence, some research has examined profiles of motivation, in other words, unique combinations (e.g., high in “good” motivation and low in “bad”/“ugly” motivation or moderate intensity on all types of motivation) in various life domains such as work (e.g., Howard et al., 2016), and exercise (e.g., Lindwall et al., 2017).

C3.2S3 Basic Psychological Needs

C3.2P6 The proposition that all motivations are not made equal can also be looked at from the perspective of the basic psychological needs proposed by Ryan and Deci’s (2017) SDT. In brief, within SDT, three such needs have been put forward, the satisfaction of which is essential for good-quality motivation. Specifically, when people feel satisfied about their autonomy (“I feel personal ownership of my behavior”),

competence (“I have the skills to achieve outcomes important to me”), and relatedness (“I relate to others around me in meaningful ways”), then their motivation is of high quality, and they are able to engage fully in a behavior, learn, and/or achieve outcomes important to them (e.g., attain goals, experience better physical and mental health; Ntoumanis et al., 2020; Su & Reeve, 2011). Hence, *psychological need satisfaction* is yet another facet of “good” motivation.

C3.2P7 However, it is possible for people to experience that one or more of their three basic needs are frustrated. For instance, at the tender age of 32 years, I had to join the Greek Navy as a conscript. While doing my compulsory national service, I felt my need for autonomy was frustrated (I had no choice but to be there!); my need for competence was also frustrated as I had to engage in daily tasks that did not satisfy my inner desires for knowledge and exploration. My need for relatedness was also frustrated to some extent as I was not able to see my friends and family. *Psychological need frustration* represents an “ugly” facet of motivation. There is a significant body of evidence showing that need frustration results in lower quality of motivation (i.e., inner or external pressures to act) and can compromise behavioral adherence, health, and human functioning or lead to superficial engagement and learning (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

C3.2P8 More recent work (Cheon et al., 2019; Costa, Ntoumanis, & Bartholomew, 2015; Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al., 2021) has attempted to examine whether there is a “bad” facet of psychological needs, referred to as *need dissatisfaction*, whereby needs are unfulfilled but not frustrated. For instance, a new mother’s need for relatedness could be unfulfilled if she joins a social club (e.g., a new mothers group) where other members have life interests very different from hers. Research on need dissatisfaction to date has been inconclusive in terms of being able to empirically differentiate it from the other two need states.

C3.2S4 Intrinsic and Extrinsic Aspirations

C3.2P9 Another strand of research within SDT that exemplifies well the distinction between “good” and “bad” (if not “ugly”) facets of motivation is work that has been conducted on intrinsic and extrinsic life aspirations (also called intrinsic and extrinsic goals). These aspirations represent the “what” of goal striving as opposed to the “why” (which is captured by the motivational regulations). Examples of *intrinsic aspirations* include personal growth, affiliation goals (satisfying relationships with friends and family), and community contribution, whereas *extrinsic aspirations* are focused on financial success, developing a successful image, and being popular with others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Although a “good life” is an aspiration that almost all humans have, research shows that a truly fulfilling and meaningful life can only be achieved via attaining intrinsic goals. This is because intrinsic aspirations provide greater satisfaction of basic psychological needs than extrinsic goals and are linked to higher levels of vitality. In contrast, extrinsic

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aspirations are positively linked to lower vitality and more physical symptoms of poor health (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996). Hence, intrinsic goals represent another facet of “good” motivation. Although modern-day consumerism promotes “bad” motivation based on the extrinsic goals of wealth accumulation, image, and social status, such aspirations are fragile and to a large extent uncontrollable. A good life is more likely to be achieved when people set goals that help them become better persons, live their lives among people they like, and work to make their community a better place to live.

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There is a scarcity of research on how intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations can be combined within persons. An exception is a study by Bradshaw et al. (2021) which used latent profile analysis to identify three distinct profiles in large samples of young Australian, Hungarian, and US participants: disengaged from relationships and health (average extrinsic aspirations but well below average intrinsic aspirations), aspiring for interpersonal relationships more than community relationships (somewhat higher extrinsic relative to intrinsic aspirations), and aspiring for community relationships more than interpersonal relationships (highest levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic global aspirations). The last profile reported the highest well-being.

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Motivation at the Contextual Level

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Although personal motivation factors are important for energizing and directing behavior, we should not forget that individuals operate within social environments (students in schools, employees at workplaces, etc.). Hence, teachers, work supervisors, healthcare workers, sport coaches, and other individuals in position of authority or expertise can have a profound effect on the motivation of people they interact with. They do so by creating a “motivational environment” which can promote or undermine one or more types of motivation. Such an environment has been typically assessed by examining the interpersonal behaviors and communication style used by those individuals in positions of expertise or authority.

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The question of whether there are good, bad, or ugly facets of motivation can also be examined by looking at those behaviors and communication styles. These can be *need supportive* (“good”), *need indifferent* (“bad”), and/or *need thwarting* (“ugly”). For instance, in the health domain, Teixeira et al. (2020) have proposed a taxonomy of 21 motivational techniques that support one or more of the three psychological needs. Examples of such techniques are providing a meaningful rationale (e.g., “I know that this medication is not pleasant, but it has been shown to be very effective”), providing choice (e.g., of treatments), acknowledging different perspectives and negative feelings, addressing obstacles for change, and offering constructive, clear, and relevant feedback.

C3.2P13 The “ugly” side of the motivational context (i.e., need thwarting behaviors) has also been examined at length. For instance, in sport, portraits of highly pressuring coaches frequently receive media attention. Such coaches, who have the “my way or the highway” mentality, can be effective in the short term, but they can afflict significant damages on their athletes’ psychological and physical health (e.g., consider the cases of high-profile athletes from the former Eastern bloc who were pressured to take dangerous performance-enhancing drugs). Examples of need thwarting styles (e.g. Bartholomew et al., 2010; Reeve, 2009) that have been measured in the SDT literature include the use of pressuring language, oversurveillance, intimidation tactics, or more subtle manipulation techniques such as conditional regard (e.g., “accepting my children only when they behave according to how I want them to behave”).

C3.2P14 Recently, there has been an attempt to measure a third class of interpersonal behaviors, labeled *need indifferent* (Bhavsar et al., 2019). These behaviors are demonstrated when significant others are inattentive to the psychological needs of individuals they interact with. For instance, a sport coach could be unresponsive to their athletes’ opinions, may set activities that lack variety, or keep to himself or herself. Need indifferent behaviors are less motivationally damaging in comparison to need thwarting behaviors because they do not actively undermine the three psychological needs, but they nevertheless represent a “bad” facet of motivation.

C3.2P15 Similar to motivational regulations, researchers have created profiles of interpersonal behaviors by examining how they are combined. For instance, Aelterman et al. (2019) used a statistical technique called *multidimensional scaling* to visually represent distances and overlaps between different types of teachers’ motivating style. These researchers offered a fine-grained analysis of teachers’ style by showing that there were eight different combinations of supportive and unsupportive styles.

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Conclusion

C3.2P16 I often use in my invited talks on SDT and exercise behavior a cartoon of a physician asking his stunned patient “What fits your busy schedule better, exercising one hour a day or being dead 24 hours a day?” I find this cartoon to be a great example of how experts or people in positions of authority can thwart others’ needs via the communication style they use. In this particular example, the patient is likely to perceive his doctor to be belittling, probably not acknowledging his feelings or perspective. The patient may therefore feel his need for autonomy to be frustrated and develop a bad or ugly motivation for exercise (i.e., exercise out of guilt or because of perceived pressure and health threat). “Bad” and “ugly” motivation can be very powerful and easy to impose on others; for instance, parents often resort to bribing or even threaten their kids to get them to do their homework. However, there is a cost associated with using such approaches in terms of superficial emotional and cognitive

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engagement, surface learning, and long-term consequences for health and well-being. Instead, “good” motivational (i.e., need supportive) structures that nourish others’ autonomy, competence, and relatedness, although they might require more time to implement successfully, can create optimal motivational environments for individuals to motivate themselves. Within such environments, individuals will be more likely to pursue intrinsic aspirations and develop high-quality motivation, sustained behavioral engagement, and good interpersonal relations and health.