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Are Moral People Happier? Answers From Reputation-Based Measures of Moral Character

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Philosophers have long debated whether moral virtue contributes to happiness or whether morality and happiness are in conflict. Yet, little empirical research directly addresses this question. Here, we examined the association between reputation-based measures of everyday moral character (operationalized as a composite of widely accepted moral virtues such as compassion, honesty, and fairness) and self-reported well-being across two cultures. In Study 1, close others reported on U.S. undergraduate students' moral character (two samples; *N*s = 221/286). In Study 2, Chinese employees ($N = 711$) reported on their coworkers' moral character and their own well-being. To better sample the moral extremes, in Study 3, U.S. participants nominated "targets" who were among the most moral, least moral, and morally average people they personally knew. Targets ($N = 281$) self-reported their well-being and nominated informants who provided a second, continuous measure of the targets' moral character. These studies showed that those who are more moral in the eyes of close others, coworkers, and acquaintances generally experience a greater sense of subjective well-being and meaning in life. These associations were generally robust when controlling for key demographic variables (including religiosity) and informant-reported liking. There were no significant differences in the strength of the associations between moral character and well-being across two major subdimensions of both moral character (kindness and integrity) and well-being (subjective well-being and meaning in life). Together, these studies provide the most comprehensive evidence to date of a positive and general association between everyday moral character and well-being.

Keywords: well-being, morality, moral character, happiness, meaning

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Are more moral people happier than less moral people? Although this has been the subject of much philosophical speculation (for a review, see Mieth, 2017), little empirical research directly addresses this question. As we explain below, the answer is not obvious. In the present work, we address this question by examining the associations between reputation-based measures of moral character and self-report measures of well-being.

Philosophical Theses on the Relation Between Morality and Happiness

There have been four main philosophical theses on the relation between morality and happiness (for reviews, see Horn, 2005; Mieth, 2017). First, the identity thesis *equates* happiness with virtue (e.g., courage, justice, and moderation). On this view, happiness and

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virtue are one and the same concept: to be happy *is* to be virtuous. However, if happiness is understood as being *identical* to morality, then there is no empirical answer to the question of whether moral people are happier because it is definitionally true. Although past work suggests that lay perceivers consider a hypothetical agent's morality when judging how "happy" they are (Phillips et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2021), there is no evidence that people believe that the concepts of morality and happiness are identical.

Three remaining philosophical theses pertain to the relation between happiness and morality when they are considered distinct concepts (Horn, 2005; Mieth, 2017). The incompatibility thesis posits that there is a conflict between morality and happiness. The harmony thesis posits that morality is a necessary condition for happiness. Finally, the dissonance thesis suggests that there is no definite correlation between morality and happiness. These three theses do not exhaust the possible causal relations between morality and happiness. For instance, high levels of morality might generally lower happiness, without morality being *incompatible* with happiness. Similarly, high levels of morality might generally elevate happiness, without morality being *necessary* for happiness. Our goal in this project was to provide initial evidence that would speak to—and potentially rule out—some of the possible causal relations between morality and happiness. To do so, we examine whether a person's moral character is associated with their psychological well-being. In line with the subjective well-being tradition (Diener, 1984), we define happiness in terms of experiencing more positive emotion, less negative emotion, and more satisfaction with life. Therefore, we test whether moral people tend to *feel* less happy (consistent with the incompatibility thesis and its cognates), more happy (consistent with the harmony thesis and its cognates), or similarly happy (consistent with the dissonance thesis) compared with less moral people. Below, we consider the theoretical arguments and empirical evidence for each of these possibilities.

Why Might Moral People Be Less Happy?

The incompatibility thesis is premised on the idea that happiness eventuates by pursuing our own interests, whereas morality places constraints on the extent to which we can pursue our personal well-being (Mieth, 2017). Consistent with this perspective, Wolf (1982) brought the tension between morality and happiness into sharp relief, painting a portrait of a moral saint as someone who "sacrifices his own interests to the interests of others, and feels the sacrifice as such" (p. 420). Similarly, some psychological definitions of morality emphasize self-sacrifice in that the function of moral systems is to "suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible" (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010, p. 800).

Beyond self-sacrifice, being more moral might also come with additional intrapsychic costs. First, whereas immoral people may be relatively indifferent to others' suffering (Marsh et al., 2013), moral people may often experience distress when they notice suffering in their immediate environments or when they consider the amount of suffering in the world. Second, moral people might also be more bothered by others' immorality. Third, whereas immoral people might be relatively unconcerned about doing the right thing, the most moral people might become preoccupied with ensuring that they are making morally "right" decisions and living up to their moral standards. In fact, "scrupulosity" has been identified as a subtype of obsessive–compulsive disorder involving religious or moral obsessions (e.g., being overly concerned about potentially having committed a moral transgression; Ong et al., 2021). Finally, although moral people are generally liked and respected more (Hartley et al., 2016), there is some evidence that those who engage in counternormative moral actions (e.g., vegetarians, whistleblowers) sometimes experience backlash (Dyck et al., 2010; Minson & Monin, 2012; Nezlek et al., 2023). Thus, moral people may be less happy if they subjugate their personal interests for the sake of moral causes, feel greater distress in response to others' suffering or immorality, experience greater worry and internal conflict about their own moral decisions, or face social disapproval for their moral endeavors.

Why Might Moral People Be Happier?

Other theorists suggest not only that morality and happiness can be reconciled but that morality is a precursor for happiness and possibly even necessary for it (Horn, 2005; Mieth, 2017). For example, James (1878, as cited in Prentice et al., 2019) claimed that "the joy of moral self-approbation … [may be] required to make the notion of mere existence tolerable" (p. 7). Modern authors have similarly argued that believing oneself to be a good person may be a basic psychological need (Prentice et al., 2019). The most straightforward means of acquiring such a belief is presumably to act morally and to be a good person.

Some forms of moral behavior, such as acts of kindness, spending money on others, and helping or volunteering, can also be emotionally rewarding (Curry et al., 2018; Dunn et al., 2014; Ferguson et al., 2012; Hofmann et al., 2014; Hui et al., 2020; aka the "warm glow"; Andreoni, 1990). Similarly, those who are more agreeable (and thereby possess some morally relevant tendencies such as kindness, helpfulness, and respectfulness) tend to report greater well-being (Anglim et al., 2020). Furthermore, treating others with compassion, respect, and integrity may facilitate mutually satisfying relationships and also cause others to like, respect, and trust you more (Goodwin et al., 2014; Hartley et al., 2016). Social connection and esteem are consistently considered to be important for well-being across several models of basic needs (Dweck, 2017; Kenrick et al., 2010; Maslow, 1943). For these reasons, morality may provide identity-related, emotional, and social pathways to personal fulfillment.

Why Might There Be No Association Between Morality and Happiness?

It is possible, however, that the costs and benefits of morality (described above) would cancel each other out, either within the same person or across people. For instance, across people, the relation between morality and happiness might also depend on "who we are, on which of our particular plans are most important to us, and on how well these plans fit into the surrounding world" (Mieth, 2017, p. 251). For example, whereas agency (promoting one's own interests) and communion (promoting others' interests) are often conceptualized as being in tension (Wiggins, 1991), moral exemplars are able to transcend this conflict and successfully integrate agency with communion, such that they align their own interests with the interests of others (Frimer et al., 2011). In this way, morality may lead to more happiness among exemplars but less happiness among

nonexemplars. Morality and happiness could also be positively associated only for those who see morality as being central to their identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002) or for those who are living in a context (e.g., social network or culture) in which morality is especially valued. In sum, if the costs and benefits of morality cancel each other out, or if the association between morality and happiness depends on individual and contextual moderators, there may be no overall association between morality and happiness.

Conceptualizing and Measuring Moral Character

To examine whether moral people feel happier, we need to be able to measure a person's overall moral character. Moral character is an unusually difficult construct to define and operationalize (for a review, see Sun & Schwitzgebel, 2024); indeed, centuries of philosophical theorizing have not yet resulted in widespread convergence on what it means to be a moral person (Gert & Gert, 2020). For example, should we judge a person's moral character based on the overall balance of the positive and negative consequences of their actions (*consequentialism*), the frequency with which they follow moral rules (e.g., keeping promises, not lying; *deontology*), or the extent to which they embody virtuous character traits, such as compassion, honesty, and fairness (*virtue ethics*)? Should we apply fixed moral criteria (e.g., consequentialism) to judge the moral character of all people—irrespective of whether those who are being judged personally consider the selected criteria to be valid—or should we take a flexible approach and leave the definition of morality up to the individual (Meindl & Graham, 2014)?

Some of the hypothesized mechanisms that link morality with well-being (e.g., reputational benefits) depend on moral character being operationalized in a way that aligns with common understandings of morality. Accordingly, in line with Fleeson et al. (2014; see also Uhlmann et al., 2015), we conceptualize moral character as a set of personality traits—stable, enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, motivations, and behaviors—that reflect widely accepted moral virtues (e.g., compassion, honesty, fairness, and loyalty). Such widely accepted moral virtues are characteristics that people in our populations of interest generally consider to be particularly relevant to matters of "right" or "wrong" and that reflect ethical, virtuous, or admirable conduct.

Existing personality trait models—the Big Five and HEXACO—contain some morally relevant content. In the Big Five model, the agreeableness and conscientiousness domains have been said to represent "the classic dimensions of character" and to have "moral overtones" (McCrae & John, 1992, p. 197). For example, trait agreeableness predicts prosocial behavior in economic games (Thielmann et al., 2020). In the HEXACO model, the honesty–humility domain has sometimes been interpreted as measuring "integrity" (Szirmák & De Raad, 1994), "trustworthiness" (Di Blas & Forzi, 1998), or "morality" (Angleitner & Ostendorf, 1989), and is the HEXACO domain that has been most widely linked to immoral behavior (e.g., cheating, criminality, and unethical decision making; for a meta-analysis, see Zettler et al., 2020). However, no single Big Five or HEXACO domain adequately represents the broader construct of moral character. Moreover, not all facets of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and honesty–humility are morally relevant. For example, within the agreeableness domain, being trustful is generally considered less morally relevant than being respectful or compassionate (Sun & Goodwin, 2020). Finally, standard measures of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and honesty–humility do not capture the full breadth of prototypical moral virtues (e.g., loyalty; honesty as truthfulness; Furr et al., 2022; Reynolds et al., 2023). This is perhaps unsurprising, considering that the Big Five taxonomy was developed on the basis of a set of traits that excluded many morally relevant descriptors (e.g., "fair," "evil," "corrupt," "moral," "heroic," "honorable," "offensive," and "self-involved") on the grounds that these terms reflected "social evaluations" rather than personal dispositions (Allport & Odbert, 1936). Thus, measuring broad moral character requires looking both within and beyond the "Big Few" traits (Mõttus et al., 2020).

To develop a broad measure of everyday moral character that captures a consensual lay understanding of morality that is comparable across people, we used a crowdsourcing approach to determine which personality traits people consider to be most relevant to moral character. This process ensures that the traits (e.g., compassion, honesty, fairness, loyalty) included in the resulting moral character composite are generally considered to be morally relevant. Moreover, by using the same items to evaluate all participants (as opposed to relying on completely idiosyncratic moral considerations), the resulting moral character scores are reasonably comparable across participants. Because our moral character composite may not capture everything that participants consider to be relevant to morality, we also incorporated flexible judgments in two ways. First, in Studies 1 and 3, our moral character composites included a "general morality" facet that allowed people to use their own conceptions of moral goodness to judge, for example, whether someone is a "good person," is "virtuous," or has "strong moral character" (Furr et al., 2022). In Study 3, we also allowed participants to use their own definitions of morality when nominating the most and least moral targets.

To measure these moral character traits, we chose to use reputation-based measures. Our conclusions therefore rely on the assumption that moral reputation—one's morality in the eyes of others—is a reasonable criterion for actual moral character. If, as evolutionary arguments suggest, natural selection favored people who were able to detect others' exploitative traits accurately (Trivers, 1971), people should be equipped with a roughly equivalent ability to judge others' moral character. Indeed, there is evidence that observers often agree with one another on who is more or less moral (Helzer et al., 2014). Observer reports of honesty–humility also show incremental validity over and above self-reports for predicting fairness in the dictator game (Thielmann et al., 2017). Westra (2022) further posited that because most high-stakes cooperation occurs in the context of close interpersonal relationships, such relationships provide the most relevant contexts in which people form everyday evaluations of others' moral character. Put differently, "in the everyday contexts that matter most to us, our moral character judgments can be trusted to tell us what we need to know" (Westra, 2022, p. 1476). Thus, we argue that a person's moral reputation likely carries ecologically valid information about their actual moral character.

We furthermore contend that reputation-based measures have substantial advantages over both self-reports and behavioral measures for the purpose of addressing the question of whether moral people feel happier. The self-other knowledge asymmetry model (Vazire, 2010) proposes that observer reports are less likely to be plagued by motivational and self-presentational biases that reduce the accuracy of self-reports of highly evaluative traits. Because observers have less at

stake when judging others (vs. themselves), they may be better judges of moral character (compared to the self). Reputation-based measures also circumvent important issues that would arise if we correlated self-reports of morality with self-reports of well-being. In general, because of shared method variance, correlating self-reports of any two constructs results in an overestimate of their true association (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Furthermore, there may be an additional serious confound when the goal is to estimate the association between moral character and well-being: Because happy people are more likely to self-enhance (Dufner et al., 2019), a positive correlation between self-reported moral character and self-reported well-being could be explained by happy peoples' greater tendency to self-enhance (rather than moral peoples' greater tendency to feel happy).

Behavioral measures of morality would circumvent the above issues but would come with a different pair of weaknesses: unrepresentativeness and insensitivity to psychological and contextual moderators. Past work paints a mixed picture of the associations between specific moral behaviors (e.g., vegetarianism, donating, volunteering, lying) and well-being (DePaulo et al., 1996; Kushlev et al., 2022; Nezlek et al., 2018; Whillans et al., 2016). However, any single behavior may not be representative of a person's general moral tendencies. For example, a person who neither donates nor volunteers may nevertheless be moral in many ways that are not captured by those specific behavioral measures. Thus, it is unclear whether findings that pertain to specific moral behaviors would generalize to the well-being implications of having generally good moral character. Given the difficulty of directly measuring even a single instance of a single morally relevant behavior (especially for low base-rate behaviors, such as cheating or acts of violence), it would be infeasible to assess enough different behaviors on enough occasions to draw broad and robust conclusions about a person's overall moral character. In contrast, reputation-based measures of broad traits allow well-acquainted observers to use whatever information they feel is relevant to judging how broadly "compassionate," "honest," "fair," and "reliable" (for example) a person is, based on many interactions with that person.

In addition, whereas behavioral measures assume a constant mapping of behavior to moral character, the same behavior can have different moral implications depending on its underlying mental states and its surrounding circumstances. For example, people can be vegetarian for moral or health reasons (Hopwood et al., 2020). Similarly, a person may donate time or money for genuinely altruistic or more reputation-enhancing reasons. When evaluating others' moral character, people consider not only their actions but also the intentionality of these actions (Malle, 2006), the selflessness of a person's motives (Barasch et al., 2014), and whether it was easy or difficult for the person to do the right thing (Berman & Small, 2018). For instance, donating 10% of one's income might be more admirable for someone who earns $20,000 per year compared to someone who earns $200,000 per year. Unlike many behavioral measures, reputation-based measures readily allow observers to incorporate these kinds of important psychological and contextual considerations into their moral character judgments.

In sum, we conceptualized moral character as a composite of widely accepted moral virtues and used reputation-based measures to assess these virtues. In doing so, our operationalization of moral character prioritizes breadth and ecological validity and eliminates important artefactual and confounding explanations.

Specificity of the Relation Between Morality and Well-Being

Our main goal was to answer the broad question of whether moral people tend to feel happier. However, the answer to the question of whether moral people are happier might depend on which notions of "morality" and "happiness" are being considered (Mieth, 2017). For comprehensiveness, we therefore examined whether the association between morality and well-being varies for kindness versus integrity and for subjective well-being versus meaning in life.

Just as nonmoral personality can be conceptualized at the level of broad domains, narrower aspects or facets (DeYoung et al., 2007; Soto & John, 2017a), or even narrower nuances (Mõttus et al., 2017), moral character can be conceptualized at different levels of granularity. To balance the goals of parsimony and comprehensiveness for this initial investigation, we relied on a broad distinction between moral traits that has variously been conceived as the distinction between the ethic of care versus the ethic of justice (Gilligan, 1982), between benevolence versus integrity (Moore et al., 2019), between "communal" versus "deliberative" moral exemplars (Walker et al., 2010), and between more versus less interpersonally warm moral traits (Goodwin et al., 2014). Whereas a large literature suggests that kindness (e.g., helping, volunteering, prosocial spending) is modestly associated with personal well-being (for meta-analyses, see Curry et al., 2018; Hui et al., 2020), almost no research has considered the well-being implications of integrity-related aspects of morality (e.g., honesty, fairness, and loyalty; cf. Le et al., 2022; Levine & Cohen, 2018). Kindness and integrity could have similar effects on happiness via some shared positive (e.g., moral self-regard, reputational benefits) and negative (e.g., onerous self-sacrifice, disappointment in others) mechanisms. However, given that integrity often involves standing up for moral principles (e.g., Baumert et al., 2020)—even at a cost to interpersonal harmony—there are some reasons to think that kindness (vs. integrity) might be more strongly associated with personal happiness.

Although the subjective well-being tradition has dominated the study of psychological well-being, philosophers and psychologists alike have expressed dissatisfaction with a purely hedonic conception (Chappell & Meissner, 2024; DeYoung & Tiberius, 2023; Ryff, 1989). "Eudaimonic" theories suggest instead that well-being comprises the achievement of various objective goods such as meaning in life, purpose, positive relationships, engagement, autonomy, and personal growth (Huta & Waterman, 2014; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011). Happiness has most frequently been contrasted with meaning in life (e.g., Wolf, 1997b), which is defined in terms of significance (believing that one's life has value), purpose (having goals and direction in life), and coherence (feeling like life makes sense; King et al., 2016). Theoretically, acting in line with moral principles may involve making personal sacrifices or incurring social costs that reduce happiness but nevertheless feel meaningful because they align with deeply held values and provide a sense of significance. Religious perspectives also often emphasize the transcendent nature of morality as an inherent part of a broader existential framework that gives life a sense of purpose and

coherence. Empirically, there is some evidence that meaning is more strongly associated with prosocial contributions than is happiness, whereas happiness is more strongly associated with receiving from others, ease, and personal satisfaction than is meaning (Baumeister et al., 2013; Dwyer et al., 2017; Huang & Yang, 2023). Thus, it is plausible that while moral people may not feel happier, they might experience their lives as being more meaningful.

The Present Research

In sum, existing research does not directly address the question of whether people who have better moral character feel happier. Our primary goal was to take a first step toward answering this broad question. We also explored whether this association differs for different aspects of moral character (kindness vs. integrity) and well-being (subjective well-being vs. meaning in life), what the functional form of this association is, and finally, which mechanisms might explain it. To do so, we conducted three studies that examined the associations between reputation-based measures of moral character and self-reports of psychological well-being. In Study 1, close others reported on U.S. undergraduate students' moral character. To examine generalizability to informants that were not self-selected and to a different culture, in Study 2, Chinese employees reported on their teammates' moral character and their own well-being. To better sample the moral extremes and examine generalizability to an open-ended assessment of moral character, in Study 3, U.S. participants nominated "targets" who were among the most moral, least moral, and morally average people they personally knew. These targets subsequently self-reported their well-being and nominated their own informants, who provided an additional, continuous measure of targets' moral character.

Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures in the study, and we follow the Journal Article Reporting Standards (Kazak, 2018). All study materials and the data and code required to reproduce the results reported in this article are available at https://osf.io/ntrp8. To prevent participants from reidentifying themselves and finding out what their informants said about them, the data required to reproduce the results involving potentially identifiable information (e.g., demographic variables) have been password-protected. The password is available upon request from the first author.

Study 1 used two existing data sets from a previous study on moral change goals (Sun & Goodwin, 2020). The analyses (which are novel and have not previously been reported) were not preregistered (but exclusion criteria and stopping rules were determined by the preregistration for the primary data collection). We preregistered stopping rules, exclusions, and analysis plans for Study 2 (https://osf.io/xmtky) and Study 3 (https://osf.io/se4jw). However, due to unexpected issues that arose during the data collection process, we modified various aspects of the Study 3 protocol (importantly, in a data-independent way; see the Supplemental Material, Section 3). In addition, we deviated from our preregistered analyses for Studies 2 and 3 in favor of an analytic approach that we now believe is more appropriate. We provide further justification for this deviation in the Additional Analyses section, as well as in Section 5 of the Supplemental Material.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data collection procedures for Study 1 were approved by the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) at the University of Pennsylvania (Sample 1; IRB ID: 831767; Study Title: Moral Change Goals) and the University of California, Davis (Sample 2; IRB ID: 1328211-2; Study Title: Moral Change Goals).

Targets for Study 1 comprised undergraduate students from the University of Pennsylvania (Sample 1; $N = 300$) and the University of California, Davis (Sample 2; $N = 500$) who were compensated with course credit. Targets completed a survey in which they reported their well-being and provided the names and email addresses of up to four informants. Of the 1,023 (Sample 1) and 1,464 (Sample 2) nominated informants, 417 (Sample 1) and 541 (Sample 2) informants responded to a survey in which they reported the targets' moral character traits. Informants were entered into a prize drawing for a 1 in 10 chance of winning a $20 Amazon gift card. For this study, we only retained targets who had at least one informant.

The final subset of 221 targets (163 women, 57 men, one not reported) used in the Sample 1 analyses ranged in age from 18 to 29 years ($M = 19.54$, $SD = 1.33$) and identified as White/Caucasian ($n = 109$), Asian ($n = 60$), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 21$), Black ($n = 13$), Pacific Islander ($n = 1$), other or multiple ($n = 16$), or did not disclose their ethnicity or race ($n = 1$). The final subset of 417 informants (288 women, 124 men, two other, three not reported) used in the Sample 1 analyses ranged in age from 18 to 98 years ($M = 28.54$, $SD = 15.22$). Informants reported having known their targets for an average of 9.39 years ($SD = 8.17$) and being very close to them on average ($M = 6.29$, $SD = 0.95$; 1 = *not close at all*, 7 = *extremely close*). Informants reported being friends with the target ($n = 234$), parents ($n = 97$), current romantic partners ($n = 37$), siblings ($n = 32$), other family members ($n = 8$), former romantic partners ($n = 3$), or coworkers ($n = 1$), and five reported their relationship with the target as "other."

The final subset of 286 targets (242 women, 43 men, one not reported) used in the Sample 2 analyses ranged in age from 18 to 47 years ($M = 19.80$, $SD = 2.81$) and identified as Asian ($n = 123$), White/Caucasian ($n = 68$), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 53$), Black ($n = 2$), Pacific Islander ($n = 1$), other or multiple ($n = 38$), or did not disclose their ethnicity or race ($n = 1$). The final subset of 541 informants (396 women, 135 men, two other, eight not reported) used in the Sample 2 analyses ranged in age from 18 to 81 years ($M = 25.63$, $SD = 12.56$). Informants reported having known their targets for an average of 8.95 years ($SD = 7.85$) and being very close to them on average ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 1.11$). Informants reported being friends with the target ($n = 334$), parents ($n = 80$), siblings ($n = 57$), current romantic partners ($n = 30$), other family members ($n = 20$), former romantic partners ($n = 3$), teachers ($n = 3$), or coworkers ($n = 1$), and eight reported their relationship with the target as "other."

These sample sizes were determined by the previous data collection and allow effect sizes of $r = .19$ (Sample 1) and $r = .16$ (Sample 2) to be detected with 80% power (with $\alpha = .05$). Given that the average effect size in individual differences research has been estimated to be $r = .19$ (Gignac & Szodorai, 2016), we believe that these sample sizes are appropriate.

Measures

See Supplemental Table S13 for descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities, and intercorrelations among all variables.

Informant-Reported Moral Character. As described in the Scale Development Process section, we created a moral character index by combining the most morally relevant items across several existing measures. The resulting 32-item measure captured eight facets of moral character: general morality (six items; e.g., "Tends to act morally"), compassion (four items; e.g., "Is helpful and unselfish with others"), respectfulness (four items; e.g., "Is respectful, treats others with respect"), honesty (four items; e.g., "Consistently tells the truth"), interpersonal fairness (four items; e.g., "Treats people fairly"), fraud avoidance (four items; e.g., "Would never accept a bribe, even if it were very large"), loyalty (four items; e.g., "Wants to be loyal even when it's hard"), and dependability (two items; e.g., "Is reliable, can always be counted on"). In other words, the measure captures a blend of morally relevant facets from the Big Five agreeableness and conscientiousness domains and the HEXACO honesty–humility domain, as well as facets that are not well-represented within these taxonomies (general morality, interpersonal fairness, honesty, and loyalty). Informants rated the extent to which each of these statements described their target (e.g., "[Target's name] treats people fairly") using a 5-point scale anchored by *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*. The compassion, respectfulness, and dependability facets were preceded by the item stem, "[Target's name] is someone who…" All other items were simply preceded by the target's name.

To compute an overall index of informant-reported moral character, we computed a scale mean for each of the eight facets and then averaged them together. The eight facets formed a very reliable scale (ω = .89 for both samples; see Supplemental Table S5 for factor loadings). We also created kindness and integrity indices based on exploratory factor analyses (see Supplemental Tables S7–S9). The kindness index comprised the compassion and respectfulness facets (ωs = .83/.79). The integrity index comprised the honesty, fraud avoidance, loyalty, and dependability facets (ωs = .80/.76). We did not include the interpersonal fairness measure in either the kindness or integrity composites because it appeared to reflect a blend of both factors. That is, we speculate that "treating people fairly" could be interpreted as "treating people well" (kindness) or as "treating people justly" (integrity). For each index, we averaged together the constituent facets.

Scale Development Process. We constructed a new measure because we believed that there was no comprehensive measure of moral character at the time. The primary purpose of the current project was to examine whether moral people tend to be happier. We therefore aimed to develop a measure of overall moral character that (a) was coherent and (b) conceptually representative of a broad range of prototypical moral character traits (including "warmer" traits such as compassion, as well as "cooler" traits such as honesty; Goodwin et al., 2014) that are widely considered to be morally relevant in a U.S. context. To do so, we selected items from the 15 facets of the Big Five Inventory–Revised (BFI-2; Soto & John, 2017a), the honesty–humility (H) subscale of the HEXACO–PI–R (Lee & Ashton, 2018), and the dimensions of the Moral Character Questionnaire (MCQ; Furr et al., 2022). Each of these three scales captures different aspects of morality; accordingly, this combined approach is preferable to relying on any one scale.

Our decisions regarding which items to include within our combined measure were informed by a combination of crowdsourced moral relevance judgments (see Supplemental Table S1) and conceptual considerations (described below). Moral relevance was established via a trait norming study in which 88 Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers rated the moral valence of each item (e.g., "How morally good or morally bad is it to be someone who is compassionate, has a soft heart?"; −4 = *extremely morally bad,* 0 = *neither morally good nor morally bad*, +4 = *extremely morally good*). It seemed appropriate to rely on U.S.-based MTurk workers' moral relevance judgments to create a measure of moral character that would be applicable (i.e., recognizable as a measure of moral character) to U.S.-based university students. To validate this assumption, we reanalyzed similar previously published moral relevance norming data provided by MTurk workers and students at the two universities that were included in Study 1 (Sun & Goodwin, 2020). This reanalysis showed that MTurk workers' average ratings of the moral relevance of 42 personality items correlated .98 (University of Pennsylvania) and .96 (University of California, Davis) with university students' average ratings.

Although the BFI-2 was not designed to measure moral character, McCrae and John (1992) suggested that the agreeableness and conscientiousness domains represent "the classic dimensions of character" and have "moral overtones" (p. 197). Indeed, moral relevance norms showed that two facets of agreeableness (compassion and respectfulness; four items each) and two items from the responsibility facet of conscientiousness were rated as being moderately to very morally relevant (see Supplemental Table S1). Compassion captures tendencies to be emotionally concerned for and altruistic toward others (e.g., "Is compassionate, has a soft heart"), whereas respectfulness involves respecting others' needs and rights by restraining antagonistic behaviors (e.g., "Starts arguments with others" [r]). The two most morally relevant items from the responsibility facet ("Is reliable, can always be counted on"; "Is dependable, steady") appear to capture the construct of dependability; thus, we formed a dependability composite based on these two items.

The HEXACO model is a six-factor alternative to the Big Five model (Ashton & Lee, 2007). The sixth factor, honesty–humility, describes tendencies toward sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance, and modesty. This factor has sometimes been labeled "morality" or "integrity" and captures individual differences relevant to the absence of selfishness (Diebels et al., 2018). Our moral relevance norms (see Supplemental Table S1) showed that the fairness facet was among the most morally relevant traits that we assessed. The sincerity and modesty facets were rated as being only moderately morally relevant, and greed avoidance was only slightly morally relevant. Thus, we only included the fairness facet. The four items in this facet reflect an unwillingness to engage in fraud or corruption (e.g., "Would be tempted to use counterfeit money, if they were sure they could get away with it" [r]).

Finally, we included additional measures of moral character from the MCQ (Furr et al., 2022): general morality (six items; e.g., "Consistently wants to do the moral thing"), honesty (four items; e.g., "Is an honest person"), fairness (four items; e.g., "Wants to treat everyone as fairly as possible"), and loyalty (four items; e.g., "Believes it is important not to betray people"). Compared to the HEXACO measure of fairness, the MCQ measure of fairness focuses on interpersonal fairness (i.e., treating others fairly). Henceforth, we will therefore refer to the HEXACO measure of fairness as "fraud avoidance" and the MCQ measure of fairness as "interpersonal

fairness." Each of these measures was rated as being moderately to very morally relevant (see Supplemental Table S1).

Note that the MCQ also includes measures of compassion, respectfulness, and purity, which we did not include. The compassion measure (e.g., "Is a compassionate person") was conceptually redundant with the better-established BFI-2 measure, and the respectfulness measure was similar to the BFI-2 measure but also included items that were more specific to respect for authority or tradition (e.g., "I do not want to be rude or irreverent toward others"), rather than more generally treating people with respect. Purity was excluded because it is less prototypically relevant to morality (compared to the other MCQ domains of honesty, fairness, compassion, and loyalty) across religious and political affiliations (Graham et al., 2009). Purity has also been critiqued as being an ill-defined construct that has at least nine different meanings (pathogen avoidance, maintaining natural order, maintaining chastity and avoiding sexual taboos, elicitors of disgust, self-control, "general immorality," not thinking immoral thoughts, spiritual integrity, and respecting God; Gray et al., 2023).

The final measure was coherent ($\omega = .89$ for both samples, as noted above), with each facet loading between .52 and .90 in a one-factor model (see Supplemental Table S5). Moreover, the included facets ranged between 2.29 and 2.95 in moral relevance (on a 4-point scale; see Supplemental Table S1). Therefore, this measure seemed appropriate for testing whether people with better overall moral character (based on a conceptualization of morality that is recognizable to U.S. participants) tend to be happier. Supplemental Table S3 shows the final number of items included from each measure, Supplemental Table S4 shows the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among the facets (*r*s .30–.76), and the codebook on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/e5a26) contains the final items.

A secondary goal of this project was to examine whether different aspects of moral character had different associations with well-being. To reduce the large number of facets into a smaller number of manageable dimensions, we conducted exploratory factor analyses (see Supplemental Tables S7–S9). The kindness and integrity indices (described above) were derived from these factor analyses. However, this two-factor model should not be interpreted as a definitive model of the structure of moral character traits. The question of how best to model the structure of moral character is beyond the scope of our article.

Self-Reported Well-Being. Targets reported their positive (*positive*, *joyful*, *contented*) and negative emotions (*anxious*, *angry*, *sad*) using the three-item positive and negative emotion subscales from the PERMA-Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016). Targets rated these statements (e.g., "In general, how often do you feel joyful?") on an 11-point scale (0 = *never*, 10 = *always* or 0 = *not at all*, 10 = *completely*, depending on the item). They also rated their overall satisfaction with life ("All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole?") on an 11-point scale (0 = *completely dissatisfied*, 10 = *completely satisfied*). To compute a subjective well-being index, we averaged together these respective components (positive emotion, negative emotion reversed, and life satisfaction).

Targets reported their sense of meaning in life using the three-item meaning subscale from the PERMA-Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016). Targets rated these statements (e.g., "In general, to what extent do you lead a purposeful and meaningful life?") on an 11-point scale (0 = *not at all*, 10 = *completely*).

Data Analyses

Analyses for all three studies were conducted using R (R Core Team, 2021). For our key analyses in Study 1, we used linear regression models in which we regressed either self-reported subjective well-being or meaning in life onto informant-reported moral character. We standardized continuous variables before entering them into the regression model. All *p* values for all three studies are two-tailed.

Results

Table 1 contains descriptive statistics for all three studies. The mean moral character ratings were relatively high in Study 1, suggesting some range restriction. Across both samples in Study 1, participants who were perceived as being more moral tended to report greater meaning in life; however, informant-reported moral character predicted subjective well-being only in Sample 2 (see Table 2 and Figure 1).

Discussion

Study 1 provides initial evidence for a positive correlation between moral character and well-being. However, it has two limitations. First, as people tend to select informants who have positive views of them (Leising et al., 2010), this may have resulted in range restriction on the measures of moral character. Such range restriction might explain why moral character inconsistently predicted subjective well-being. To address this issue, Studies 2 and 3 employed measures of moral character from the perspective of observers who were not as close with the targets. Second, to investigate generalizability beyond undergraduate students in the United States, Study 2 examined a sample of working adults in China, and Study 3 examined a sample that comprised an approximately equal balance of undergraduate and nonundergraduate targets in the United States.

Study 2

Method

Data collection procedures for Study 2 were approved by the IRB at Harvard University (IRB ID: IRB20-2107; Study Title: Team Event Sampling Study).

Participants and Procedure

Study 2 used data from a large study of engineers at a high-tech mass transportation company headquartered in Beijing, China. A total of 835 employees (nested within 156 teams) completed a pen-and-paper baseline survey (in Chinese) in which they self-reported their well-being and provided informant reports about each of their team members' moral character. In other words, this was a round-robin design in which each participant served as both a target and an informant. On average, employees reported that they knew their team members at least somewhat well ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.21$; 1 = *not at all*, 4 = *somewhat*, 7 = *very much*), and were at least somewhat close with them ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.24$; 1 = *not at all*, 4 = *somewhat*, 7 = *very much*). After the baseline survey, employees completed a month-long experience sampling protocol (which was not relevant to the goals of this study) and a final survey. Here, we use data only

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Informant-Reported Moral Character and Self-Reported Well-Being

Study	Moral character					Subjective well-being					Meaning in life				
	M	*SD*	ω	Sk.	κ	*M*	*SD*	ω	Sk.	κ	*M*	*SD*	ω	Sk.	κ
Study 1															
Sample 1	4.31	0.44	.89	−1.27	3.01	6.4	1.29	.81	−0.49	0.15	6.79	1.69	.81	−0.54	0.13
Sample 2	4.24	0.44	.89	−1.05	1.97	6.11	1.47	.80	−0.53	0.13	6.68	1.92	.85	−0.77	0.74
Study 2	6.48	1.53	.99	−1.01	0.95	7.25	2.18	.67	−1.14	0.86	5.3	1.55	.98	−0.98	0.37
Study 3			.92					.83					.87		
Most moral	4.26	0.39		−0.69	0.46	6.61	1.26		−0.63	0.12	7.03	1.88		−0.37	−0.49
Morally average	4.01	0.46		−0.11	−0.34	6.03	1.28		−0.64	0.30	6.29	2.11		−0.46	−0.23
Least moral	3.89	0.53		−0.45	−0.07	6.12	1.74		−0.59	0.37	6.37	2.32		−0.12	−0.98
Nominators						6.46	1.54		−0.71	−0.25	6.82	1.85		−0.67	−0.07

Note. Informant-reported moral character was measured using a 1–5 scale in Studies 1 and 3 and a 1–9 scale in Study 2. Subjective well-being was measured using a 0–10 scale. Meaning was measured using a 0–10 scale in Studies 1 and 3 and a 1–7 scale in Study 2. ω = coefficient omega scale reliability, based on a unidimensional model (see formula for ω_u in Flora, 2020, Table 1). Sk. = skewness; κ = kurtosis.

from the baseline survey component of the larger study (as well as one demographic variable that was measured in the final survey).

We explored data from a subset of 119 employees (nested within 23 teams) to develop our analysis strategy (before accessing the rest of the data). We then preregistered an analysis plan and report the results based on the remainder of the data (i.e., the confirmatory subset, but note the deviations from the preregistration mentioned in the Transparency and Openness section). As preregistered, we excluded five participants who either did not have self-reports of well-being or informant reports of moral character. The final analyses comprised 711 employees (303 women, 408 men) who ranged in age from 24 to 50 years ($M = 32.32$, $SD = 5.47$) and had worked at the company for an average of 9.43 years ($SD = 5.73$). We believe that this sample size is appropriate as it is more than three times the size of Sample 1 and approximately 2.5 times the size of Sample 2 in Study 1. Employees were nested within 133 teams that comprised between four and seven employees (mean size = 5.35 employees). Thus, the number of informant reports per person (team size − 1) ranged from 3 to 6 ($M = 4.52$).

Measures

All surveys were administered in Chinese (simplified). Surveys were translated from English to Chinese and back-translated to English by bilingual graduate students in the second author's lab. Disagreements about the translations were resolved via discussion between the first two authors and an external bilingual expert. See Supplemental Table S14 for descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities, and intercorrelations among all variables.

Informant-Reported Moral Character. Because the moral character measures were administered as part of a larger study, and each participant rated three to six team members, we prioritized brevity in developing a measure of moral character for Study 2 (see the Supplemental Material, Section 2). Thus, we selected 10 moral

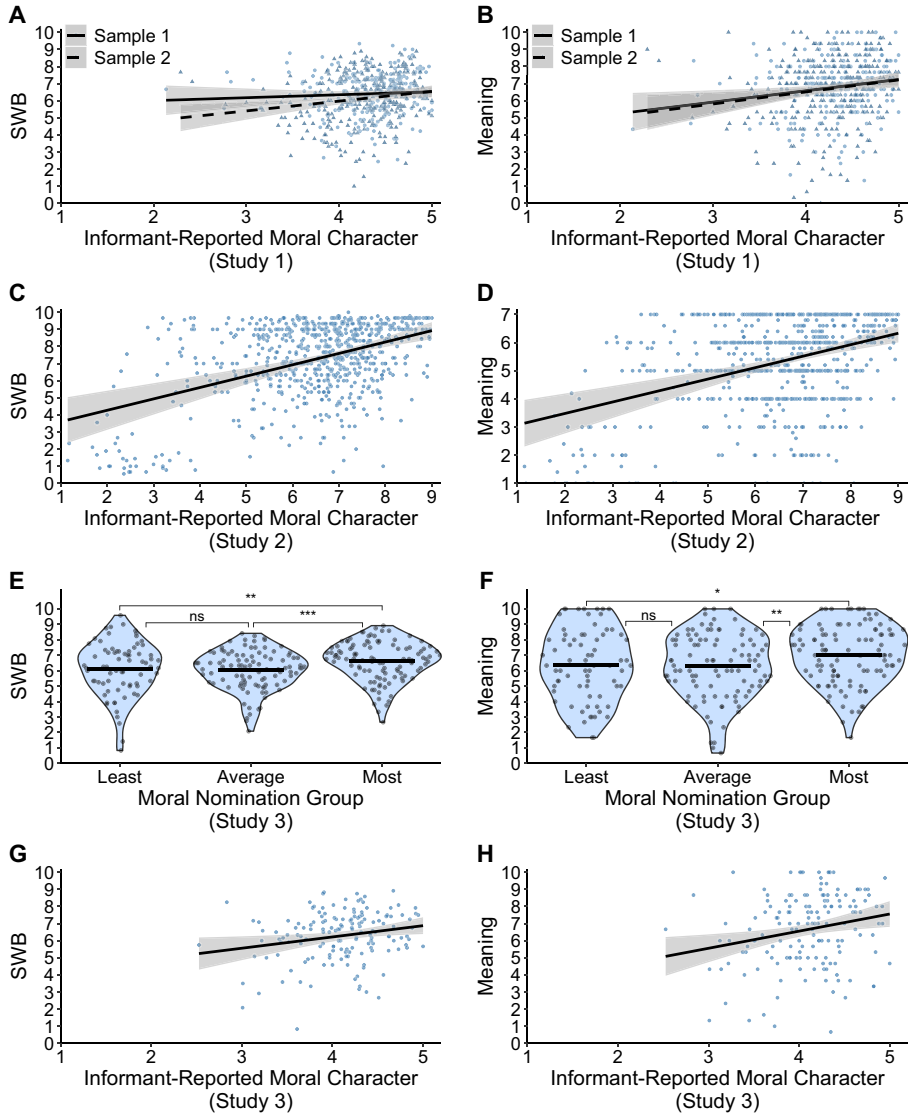
Table 2
Predicting Subjective Well-Being and Meaning in Life From Reputation-Based Measures of Moral Character

Study	Subjective well-being			Meaning in life		
	β	95% CI	*p*	β	95% CI	*p*
Study 1						
Sample 1	0.06	[−0.07, 0.19]	.383	**0.17**	**[0.04, 0.30]**	**.010**
Sample 2	**0.17**	**[0.05, 0.29]**	**.004**	**0.16**	**[0.04, 0.27]**	**.007**
Study 2	**0.47**	**[0.31, 0.62]**	**<.001**	**0.40**	**[0.26, 0.54]**	**<.001**
Study 3						
Group comparisons						
Most versus least	**0.33**	**[0.02, 0.64]**	**.04**	**0.31**	**[0.01, 0.62]**	**.042**
Most versus average	**0.44**	**[0.17, 0.72]**	**.002**	**0.36**	**[0.09, 0.64]**	**.008**
Average versus least	−0.06	[−0.38, 0.26]	.709	−0.04	[−0.36, 0.29]	.822
Most versus nominators	0.10	[−0.12, 0.33]	.372	0.11	[−0.13, 0.36]	.363
Nominators versus least	0.21	[−0.07, 0.49]	.135	0.22	[−0.07, 0.51]	.133
Continuous	**0.22**	**[0.04, 0.39]**	**.015**	**0.22**	**[0.07, 0.38]**	**.005**

Note. Each well-being outcome was analyzed in a separate model. Coefficients in bold were statistically detectable at $p < .05$. Estimates for Studies 2 and 3 were from linear regression models with uncentered informant-reported moral character scores as the predictor, no fixed effects, and cluster-robust standard errors. Group comparisons = comparisons among the moral nomination groups and the nominators themselves, in which the first-mentioned group was coded as 1 and the second-mentioned group was coded as 0 (e.g., for "Most vs. least," the most moral group was coded as 1 and the least moral group was coded as 0). Continuous = results based on the continuous moral character index, as reported by self-selected informants (rather than based on the nomination groups). β = standardized regression coefficients; CI = confidence interval.

Figure 1

Associations Between Moral Character and Subjective Well-Being and Meaning in Life Across All Three Studies



Note. Gray bands in Panels A–D and G–H denote 95% confidence intervals (which were based on cluster-robust standard errors for Studies 2 and 3). Horizontal lines in Panels E and F denote the means for each group. SWB = subjective well-being. See the online article for the color version of this figure.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$. $^{ns}p > .05$.

adjectives that were rated as being highly morally relevant in Goodwin et al.'s (2014) norming data and either high (*kind*, *generous*, *helpful*, *grateful*, *unassuming*) or relatively lower on warmth (*fair*, *principled*, *honest*, *trustworthy*, *loyal*).

Given that there is cross-cultural variability in which traits are considered to be morally relevant (Graham et al., 2016), it is reasonable to ask whether these traits adequately capture a Chinese conception of moral character. Our 10 moral adjectives provide at least partial coverage of five of the seven dimensions that were proposed in a recent theory of Chinese moral character, based on virtues that are important in Confucianism (Yu & Xie, 2021): righteousness (*principled*, *fair*), loyalty (*loyal*), trustworthiness (*trustworthy*, *honest*), benevolence (*kind*, *generous*, *helpful*), and propriety (*unassuming*). Although *grateful* does not neatly fit within any of the Confucian dimensions, it is arguably relevant to both benevolence and propriety. However, we did not measure traits relevant to the two remaining Confucian dimensions of wisdom (e.g., *loves to learn*, *takes others' perspective*) and filial piety (e.g., *respects parents*). Thus, overall, the 10 moral trait adjectives we employed provide reasonable, if imperfect, coverage of the Chinese concept of moral character.

Employees rated each of their team members' moral character traits (e.g., "To what extent is this colleague… kind") on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *moderately*, 9 = *extremely*). After taking the

average of all informant reports, we computed an index of overall morality (the mean of all 10 adjectives; ω = .98), as well as kindness (the high-warmth items; ω = .99) and integrity (the lower-warmth items; ω = .99).

Self-Reported Well-Being. Employees completed almost the same measures of subjective well-being as in Study 1. The only difference was that the positive emotion item "To what extent do you feel contented?" (0 = *not at all*, 10 = *completely*) was reworded to "How often do you feel contented?" (0 = *never*, 10 = *always*).

Employees reported their sense of meaning in life using the five-item Presence of Meaning subscale from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006). These items (e.g., "I understand my life's meaning") were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *absolutely untrue*, 7 = *absolutely true*).

Data Analyses

In Study 2, the data had a clustered structure, with employees (Level 1) nested within teams (Level 2). To account for the clustered structure of the data, we used linear regression models with cluster-robust standard errors (and no centering or fixed effects), which we implemented using the *sandwich* (Zeileis, 2004; Zeileis et al., 2020) and *lmtest* packages (Zeileis & Hothorn, 2002). We standardized continuous variables before entering them into the regression model. The resulting estimates (reported in Table 2) represent the overall standardized associations between moral character and well-being across the entire sample.

Results

As shown in Figure 1 and Table 2, employees who were perceived as being more moral by their team members tended to report greater subjective well-being and meaning in life.

Discussion

Study 2 establishes generalizability to a different culture (China), age group (working adults), informant type (coworkers who were not selected by the targets), and measure of moral character (brief adjective-based ratings). However, a limitation of both Studies 1 and 2 is that there were unlikely to be many moral exemplars or truly reprehensible people within convenience samples of university students (Study 1) or employees within a morally unremarkable industry (transportation engineering; Study 2). In addition, although fixed questionnaire-based measures of moral character ensure that the concept of morality is being measured in a consistent way across targets, it is possible that these measures do not capture everything that could inform people's judgments of others' moral character. In Study 3, we use a novel nomination method to examine generalizability using an open-ended and therefore more flexible measure of morality.

Study 3

Method

Participants and Procedure Overview

Data collection procedures for Study 3 were approved by the IRB at the University of Pennsylvania (IRB ID: 844870; Study Title: Moral Character Nomination Study). As mentioned in the Transparency and Openness section, due to unexpected issues during data collection, we modified various aspects of the Study 3 protocol (importantly, in a data-independent way; for details, see the Additional Analyses section and Section 3 of the Supplemental Material). For clarity and concision, we report here the method for only the final version of the Study 3 protocol (but describe the previous versions and deviations in Section 3 of the Supplemental Material).

Study 3 comprised three groups of participants: nominators, targets, and informants. After completing a video chat screening, nominators completed an online survey in which they nominated six targets who were among the most moral, morally average, and least moral people they personally knew (two per category), rated these targets' traits and well-being (for the purpose of validity and attrition analyses), and reported their own well-being. We sent eligible targets survey links via email (along with several reminders). Targets self-reported their well-being and moral character and nominated four informants who could report on their personalities. We sent eligible informants survey links via email (along with several reminders) and invited them to report on their targets' moral character. This iterative nomination design was inspired by Leising et al.'s (2010) Study 2. Full details of eligibility criteria, response rates, and preregistered exclusions for each group are provided in Section 3 of the Supplemental Material, and Figure S2 shows a flowchart of participant exclusions and attrition.

Nominators. Nominators were a mix of psychology students (compensated with course credit) and community members (compensated with a $20 BHN Rewards gift card). After attending a 1-min video chat screening, we emailed nominators a survey link and gave them a week to complete the survey. Nominators were excluded if they failed any of four preregistered attention, comprehension, or manipulation checks (described in the Supplemental Material, Section 3).

The final subset of 156 nominators comprised 88 psychology undergraduate students and 68 community members (109 women, 41 men, four preferred to self-describe, two not reported) between the ages of 18 and 48 years (M_{age} = 21.72, SD = 4.46) who identified as White (n = 68), Asian (n = 55), Black (n = 9), Hispanic/Latino (n = 8), other or multiple (n = 13), or did not disclose their ethnicity or race (n = 3). 118 (76.13%) of the 156 nominators were currently affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania.

Targets. We asked nominators to nominate targets who were at least 18 years old and who resided in the United States. Targets were compensated with feedback about their personality and a $20 gift card of their choice (from a range of options offered by BHN Rewards, e.g., Amazon, Starbucks, charitable donations) for completing a 15–20 min survey. Targets were told that an acquaintance of theirs had recently participated in a study in which we asked them to help us recruit more participants. In other words, we did not tell targets that they were invited on the basis of their own particular characteristics, and did not reveal who provided their contact information. 281 targets provided enough data to be included in the study. Attrition analyses showed that targets who were rated as being less moral by the nominators were less likely to respond, but there was no evidence of selective attrition based on nominators' ratings of the targets' subjective well-being (for details, see the Supplemental Material, Section 3).

The final subset of 281 targets (123 women, 57 men, four preferred to self-describe, 92 not reported) comprised 109 most

moral targets, 99 morally average targets, and 73 least moral targets. Targets ranged between the ages of 18 and 78 years (M_{age} = 24.45, SD = 9.55) and identified as White (n = 77), Asian (n = 40), Hispanic/Latino (n = 20), Black (n = 19), other or multiple (n = 28), or did not disclose their ethnicity or race (n = 97). Out of the targets who responded to the respective demographic questions, 80 out of 189 (42.33%) indicated that they were currently affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania, and 99 out of 183 (54.10%) indicated that they were currently undergraduate students. Nominators reported that the targets in this final subset were their friends (n = 185), work colleagues (n = 17), parents (n = 15), romantic partners (n = 13), former friends (n = 11), siblings (n = 11), other family members (n = 9), former work colleagues (n = 7), teacher/professors (n = 3), former romantic partners (n = 2), religious leaders (n = 1), students (n = 1), or "other" (n = 6). Nominators reported that they were moderately close with the targets on average (M = 5.26, SD = 1.79; 1 = *not close at all*, 7 = *extremely close*).

Because targets did not have to have informants in order to be included in the analyses and not all informants responded (see below), the final analyses that involved comparisons between the three nomination groups were based on 281 targets ($n_{most\ moral}$ = 109, $n_{morally\ average}$ = 99, $n_{least\ moral}$ = 73), whereas the final analyses that involved informant-reported moral character were based on 156 targets. There were no detectable differences in self-reported moral character, subjective well-being, age, or gender between targets who did or did not have an informant (see Supplemental Table S31). We believe that the sample size is appropriate as it was similar to the size of each sample in Study 1, and we expected the effect size to be larger in Study 3 because our method was designed to sample a wider range of the moral character continuum.

Informants. Targets were asked to nominate four informants who were over the age of 18. We asked that they nominate at least one person who was not a current romantic partner or family member and a second person with whom they were not particularly close, but who nonetheless knew them reasonably well (e.g., a classmate, coworker, or casual acquaintance). Informants were compensated with a $5 Amazon gift card for a 15–20-min survey. In total, 325 informants provided enough data to be included in the study.

The final subset of 325 informants (182 women, 109 men, five preferred to self-describe, 29 not reported or preferred not to say)—who collectively reported on 156 targets—ranged between the ages of 18 and 78 years (M_{age} = 26.71, SD = 10.88). Of these, 104 (34.44%) informants indicated that they were currently affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania. Informants reported having known their targets for an average of 7.26 years (SD = 9.04) and being very close to them on average (M = 5.62, SD = 1.41; 1 = *not close at all*, 7 = *extremely close*). Informants reported that their targets were their friends (n = 222), current romantic partners (n = 22), siblings (n = 17), children (n = 16), work colleagues (n = 15), former romantic partners (n = 9), former friends (n = 6), parents (n = 4), other family members (n = 4), former work colleagues (n = 4), religious leaders (n = 1), or "other" (n = 5).

Measures

See Supplemental Tables S15 and S16 for descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities, and intercorrelations among all variables.

Moral Nomination Groups. Our primary measure of moral character was based on the nominators' categorical nominations. Nominators were asked to nominate targets who were among the most moral, least moral, and morally average people they personally know (two per category). As shown in the materials (available on the Open Science Framework; https://osf.io/c3pxg), we provided general definitions of what we meant by "most moral," "least moral," and "morally average" (e.g., "The most moral people care a lot about doing the 'right' thing and about living ethically and have virtuous and admirable characters"), but did not mention any specific moral traits such as kindness, fairness, or honesty. To encourage nominators to base their nominations specifically on morality (rather than generally positive or negative traits), these descriptions emphasized that the most moral targets "are not necessarily perfect in every way" and that the least moral targets "are not necessarily flawed in every way." We counterbalanced whether nominators nominated the most moral or least moral targets first. Morally average targets were always nominated last in an attempt to yield nominees who fell in between the most and least moral targets.

Self- and Informant-Reported Moral Character. We used informant reports of targets' moral character to examine the convergent validity of the moral nomination procedure (see Supplemental Table S32) and to provide a continuous, multidimensional measure of moral character. We also explored whether differences between the three groups would emerge in the targets' self-reports.

For the moral character index, we used the same item stems and most of the same items as in Study 1 but improved upon the measure in a few ways (see the Supplemental Material, Section 2). The resulting 36-item measure included the facets of benevolence (six items), respectfulness (six items), general morality (four items), dependability (four items), and the same four-item measures of loyalty, honesty, interpersonal fairness, and fraud avoidance as in Study 1. Targets and informants responded to all items using a 5-point scale anchored by *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*.

As in Study 1, to compute an overall index of moral character, we computed the means of each of the respective facets before averaging them together ($\omega_{informant}$ = .92; ω_{self} = .86; see Supplemental Table S5 for factor loadings). We also computed kindness (ω = .77) and integrity (ω = .86) indices, which comprised the same facets as in Study 1 (for results from a two-factor confirmatory factor analysis model, see Supplemental Tables S10–S11).

Informant-Reported Nonmoral Personality Traits. To examine the discriminant validity of the moral nomination procedure (see Supplemental Table S32), we obtained informant reports of three nonmoral personality traits: extraversion (e.g., "Is outgoing, sociable"), neuroticism (e.g., "Worries a lot"), and openness (e.g., "Has little creativity" [r]). For each of these traits, informants rated six statements from the BFI-2-S (Soto & John, 2017b) using a 5-point scale anchored by *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*.

Self-Reported Well-Being. Targets completed the measures of subjective well-being from Study 1. However, we added two additional items from the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (Diener et al., 2010)—"happy" and "negative"—to increase the reliability with which positive and negative emotions were measured. Thus, positive and negative emotions were measured with four items each (all using the same item format and response scale as in Study 1). Targets completed the same three-item measure of meaning in life as in Study 1.

Data Analyses

In Study 3, the data had a clustered structure, with targets (Level 1) nested within nominators (Level 2). To account for the clustered structure of the data, as in Study 2, we used linear regression models with cluster-robust standard errors (and no centering or fixed effects). For the group comparisons, we created binary variables for each contrast (e.g., for the most moral vs. least moral comparison, most moral was coded as 1 and least moral was coded as 0). We standardized continuous variables before entering them into the regression model. The resulting estimates (reported in Table 2) therefore represent the overall standardized associations between moral character and well-being across the entire sample (for continuous analyses) or the standardized difference in well-being between the two groups (for group comparison analyses).

Results

Validity of the Nomination Procedure

Did the nomination procedure work? We used two strategies to examine whether nominators' judgments were based on their perceptions of the targets' morality (for more details, see the Supplemental Material, Section 7). First, immediately after providing their nominations, we asked the nominators to provide an open-ended justification of their nominations: "Why do you consider [Target's name] to be among the [most moral; least moral; morally average] people you know?" As shown in Supplemental Figure S3, these open-ended justifications showed that the nominations were grounded in common understandings of morality (e.g., *honest*, *caring*, *puts others first, principled* vs. *dishonest, selfish, inconsiderate, manipulative*). Second, nominators rated targets on a set of 38 trait adjectives that varied in moral relevance. Nominators reported larger group differences between more morally relevant trait adjectives (e.g., *honest*, *kind*, *trustworthy*) compared to less morally relevant trait adjectives (e.g., *intelligent*, *funny*, *assertive*), $r = .87$, 95% CI [.77, .93], $p < .001$ (see Supplemental Figure S4). This suggests that nominators' judgments were based more heavily on morally relevant than morally irrelevant traits.

We also examined the convergent and discriminant validity of the moral nomination procedure. Targets in the most moral nomination group both self-reported and were perceived by their own informants as being more moral than targets in the morally average and least moral nomination groups (see Supplemental Table S32 and Figure 2). However, there were no detectable differences in self- or informant-reported moral character between the morally average and least moral groups, perhaps because—in retrospect—the phrase "morally average" has a somewhat negative connotation. Importantly, there were no signs that targets in the most moral group were more emotionally stable, extraverted, or open than those in the average and least moral groups (see Supplemental Table S32 and Figure 2). Thus, the nomination procedure successfully differentiated targets on the basis of moral traits (at least for the comparisons between the most moral vs. morally average and least moral groups) rather than generally positive personality traits.

Are Moral People Happier?

Were the more moral targets happier? Targets in the most moral nomination group self-reported greater subjective well-being and meaning in life than those in both the morally average and least moral nomination groups (see Figure 1 and Table 2). Targets who were perceived as being more moral by their own informants (irrespective of their moral nomination category) also self-reported greater subjective well-being and meaning in life (see Figure 1 and Table 2). However, there were no detectable differences in subjective well-being and meaning in life between the morally average and least moral nomination groups (likely because the nomination procedure did not adequately distinguish between these two groups). There were also no detectable differences in happiness between the nominators themselves and the most and least moral nomination groups (though the mean differences descriptively showed that nominators were in between these two extreme nomination groups).

Discussion

In sum, Study 3 corroborates the results of the previous two studies: Those who are perceived as being more moral by others experience greater subjective well-being and meaning in life. This was true not only for moral character ratings from self-selected informants (closely replicating the results of Study 1) but also for a novel open-ended nomination-based measure that allowed nominators to use their own conception of morality. Moreover, because the least moral nominees were less likely to participate than the most moral and morally average nominees, and the least moral targets who participated had a relatively high mean informant-reported moral character score of 3.89 (on a 5-point scale), the estimates from this study are likely to be conservative. Future studies that better sample the low end of the moral character continuum might find an even stronger positive association between moral character and well-being.

Additional Analyses Across All Studies

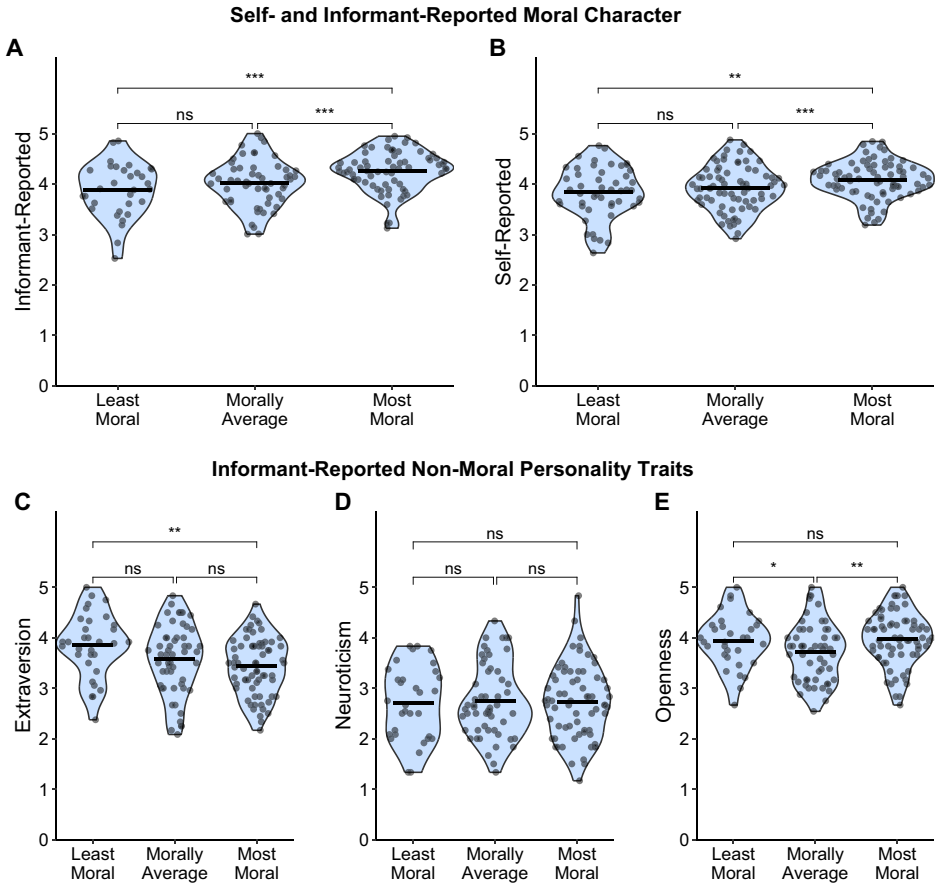
Alternative Explanations

Controlling for Liking

One potential alternative explanation is that informant reports of moral character reflect how much the informants like the target. If so, a deflationary interpretation of the current findings could be that being liked by others is associated with well-being. As an exploratory robustness check, we reran the key continuous analyses predicting targets' well-being from their overall moral character (informant-reported) while controlling for a one-item measure of how much their informants liked them (for details, see the Supplemental Material, Section 7). As shown in Supplemental Table S34, four out of five effects that were initially detectable in Studies 1 and 2 remained robust after controlling for liking. In Study 3, neither liking nor moral character predicted well-being when both predictors were included in the same model. However, it should be noted that being liked is also a probable social *consequence* of a person's moral character (Bai et al., 2020). In other words, liking could just as plausibly be conceptualized as a *mediator* of the effect of moral character on well-being (see Supplemental Figure S6, Panel B). If liking is a mediator rather than a confound, controlling for the mediator would block a genuine causal pathway between moral character and well-being (Rohrer, 2018; Wysocki et al., 2022).

Figure 2

Distributions of Moral Character Scores (Panels A–B) and Nonmoral Personality Trait Scores (Panels C–E) for the Most Moral, Morally Average, and Least Moral Targets in Study 3



Note. See Supplemental Table S32 for the βs, 95% confidence intervals, and exact *p* values. See the online article for the color version of this figure.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$. $^{ns}p > .05$.

Controlling for Demographic Variables

We also examined whether the results were robust to the inclusion of key demographic variables (for details, see the Supplemental Material, Section 7). We controlled for age, binary gender, and religiosity in all three studies. We also controlled for race in Studies 1 and 3 (all participants in Study 2 were Chinese) and for subjective (Study 2) and income-based (Study 3) indicators of socioeconomic status in Studies 2 and 3. As shown in Supplemental Table S36, the results of Studies 1 and 2 mostly remained robust, with the exception that the effect of moral character on meaning in life in Study 1, Sample 2 became marginal. For Study 3, neither the nomination groups nor the continuous informant-reported moral character index predicted well-being once these demographic covariates were included in the model. However, because there were large amounts of missing data on these demographic variables, the sample sizes were reduced to between 80 and 108 participants (from between 156 and 208 participants) for these analyses (see Supplemental Table S36). Given this substantial loss of statistical power, these results from Study 3 are inconclusive.

Within-Cluster Effects

One caveat for the interpretation of Studies 2 and 3 is that the association between moral character and well-being did not emerge at the within-team level in Study 2 and was mixed at the within-nominator level in Study 3 (see Supplemental Table S17). That is, although targets who were perceived as being more moral than the other targets in the overall sample did report greater well-being, cluster-mean-centered analyses showed no evidence that being perceived as more moral than one's teammates (Study 2) was associated with having greater well-being than those other teammates. For Study 3, the within-nominator association between morality and well-being generally remained positive and detectable for the group-based comparisons, but was not evident for the analyses involving the continuous informant-reported moral character scores (see Supplemental Table S17).

One potential explanation for why these effects may have been obscured at the within-cluster level is that cluster-mean centering may have removed valid between-person variance in informant-reported moral character scores (see Supplemental Table S18; for

other potential explanations, see the Supplemental Material, Section 5). Specifically, when clusters are small ($M_{\text{Study 2}} = 5.35$; $M_{\text{Study 3}} = 1.68$ targets who had informants), there are two issues: (a) range restriction in both moral character and well-being scores within naturally formed clusters and (b) unreliable estimates of within-cluster effects. Both issues would reduce the power to detect within-cluster effects. To examine whether these issues could have explained the null within-cluster results, we simulated 1,000 pseudo-data sets in which targets were randomly sorted into new clusters. Real teams (Study 2) or targets who were nominated by the same nominator (Study 3) were more homogeneous in their moral character and their subjective well-being (and to some extent, also their meaning in life), compared to targets that were nested within the simulated clusters (see Supplemental Table S18). When we reran the main analyses on the pseudo-data sets, the within-pseudo-team effects were consistently positive and detectable in Study 2, supporting a range restriction explanation for the Study 2 null effects. The within-pseudo-cluster effects in Study 3 were descriptively larger (compared to the within-nominator effects in the real data set) but remained null (see Supplemental Table S19). This suggests that range restriction likely contributed to the null within-cluster effects in Study 3 but cannot entirely explain them. Further simulations showed that within-pseudo-cluster effects became detectable when we increased the cluster size (see Supplemental Table S19). This suggests that unreliable estimates due to small cluster sizes also contributed to the null within-nominator effects in the real data set. We thus maintain that the analyses that examined the associations between moral character and well-being across the entire sample provide more informative answers to the question of whether moral people are happier.

Linearity and Specificity of the Association Between Well-Being and Morality

To characterize the association between morality and well-being more completely, in all three studies, we also examined whether there were curvilinear effects (by adding a quadratic term; see Supplemental Table S20), whether morality was more strongly associated with meaning in life than with subjective well-being (see Supplemental Tables S22–S23), and whether well-being was more strongly associated with kindness (e.g., compassion) than integrity (e.g., honesty, fairness; see Supplemental Table S24). We found no consistent evidence for curvilinear effects or for uniquely strong associations between specific aspects of morality and well-being.

Why Are Moral People Happier?

Finally, we explored potential mechanisms that might explain the association between moral character and subjective well-being (see the Supplemental Material, Section 6). For example, does the feeling of a "warm glow" after having acted morally explain why moral people are happier? Might excessive self-sacrifice, distress about others' suffering, and social backlash (for example) reduce the positive association between morality and happiness? Although testing mediation effects on cross-sectional data does not enable inferences about causal direction, these exploratory analyses can help identify the most promising mediators for future causal tests while also ruling out less plausible mediators. Study 3 was designed with a broader set of potential mechanisms in mind, but all three studies contained measures of self-reported positive relationships and informant-reported reputational benefits (a composite of how much targets were liked, trusted, and respected by their informants), and two studies contained measures of perceived reputational benefits (how much targets thought that others liked, trusted, and respected them). We found the most evidence for positive indirect effects of positive relationships (three out of four data sets), limited evidence for positive indirect effects of reputational benefits (one out of four data sets) and perceived reputational benefits (one out of two data sets), and no evidence for the other potential mediators that we tested (see Supplemental Table S28). Thus, highly moral individuals might be happier in part because they have better relationships with other people.

General Discussion

Is being moral generally conducive or detrimental to a person's happiness? Far from being a foregone conclusion, there were reasons to believe that the association between moral character and well-being could have been positive, negative, or null. The results of three studies provide evidence for a positive association between moral character and well-being. People who are more moral in the eyes of others tend to experience greater subjective well-being and meaning in life, and this association was similar for two major dimensions of moral character: kindness and integrity. These associations were generally robust when controlling for key demographic variables (including religiosity) and informant-reported liking. Given the scope of the question and the complexity of conceptualizing and measuring morality, our investigation is far from the last word on whether moral people are happier. Nevertheless, these studies bring much-needed empirical evidence to bear on a longstanding debate about the relation between two fundamental aspects of the good life.

Everyday Morality Is Associated With Greater Happiness

We intentionally conceptualized morality in a very broad and ecologically valid way, with a definition that spanned multiple different aspects of moral character that are relevant to everyday social life. Conceptualized this way, we observed a positive association between moral character and happiness and found some evidence consistent with the idea that morality increases happiness via positive effects on one's relationships and reputation. In contrast, supplemental analyses revealed little evidence for several plausible costs of being more moral (see Supplemental Table S28): Whereas moral people did feel like they were more constrained by rules about how to live, there was no evidence that, compared to less moral individuals, they felt excessively self-sacrificing, more distressed about suffering, more disappointed in others, or more morally conflicted. Nor did we find that others were more threatened by moral targets or saw them as being more self-righteous; in fact, *less* moral targets were seen as more threatening and self-righteous.

It remains possible, however, that the effects we observed may not hold if moral goodness were conceptualized in more specific ways. For example, some philosophers have argued that moral progress is characterized by the expansion of one's moral circles—extending moral concern to entities that previous generations did not consider worthy of moral inclusion (i.e., *moral expansiveness*; Crimston et al., 2016; Singer, 1981). Relatedly, utilitarianism is characterized by an

impartial concern for the well-being of all sentient beings, whether near or far (i.e., *impartial beneficence*; Kahane et al., 2018). However, caring about so many different entities could come with a greater risk of becoming overwhelmed by the suffering in the world. People also prefer and trust social partners who help close others over distant others (Everett et al., 2018; Law et al., 2022). To the extent that caring more about distant others comes at the cost of helping close kin, there may also be social costs of having more expansive, impartial moral concerns. Those who engage in acts of moral courage (e.g., confronting norm violators, whistleblowing, speaking up about social and political issues; Baumert et al., 2020; Dungan et al., 2015) may also face threats to their physical safety, retaliation, and even imprisonment. Thus, whether moral expansiveness, impartial beneficence, moral courage, and other specific varieties of morality are positively associated with well-being depends on whether the hedonic and social costs of these forms of morality are outweighed by their benefits.

The question of whether moral people are happier may also depend in part on what range of morality is being considered. Although we made efforts to sample from across the spectrum of moral character in Study 3, in practice, we were unable to sample targets who were either extremely moral or extremely immoral (see the Supplemental Tables S31 and S33). It is plausible that the association between morality and happiness is especially strong at the lower end of the moral continuum (where costs could include ostracism and even imprisonment). Conversely, some of the theoretical costs of morality (e.g., excessive self-sacrifice) may only emerge at extremely high levels of morality (e.g., MacFarquhar, 2016). Future studies should investigate these possibilities. Nevertheless, our results do indicate that within the normal range of moral functioning inhabited by the overwhelming majority of people, people who are perceived to be more moral are happier than people who are perceived to be less moral. In other words, everyday moral goodness is compatible with happiness.

No Evidence That Being Moral Is Associated With Meaning More Than Happiness

Our findings also speak to the ongoing debate about the distinctiveness of the subjective experiences of happiness and meaning. Past theory and research lend credence to the idea that moral character could be more strongly associated with meaning than with happiness (Baumeister et al., 2013; Dwyer et al., 2017; Huang & Yang, 2023). However, we found no evidence for this possibility (see Supplemental Table S22). Instead, moral character was similarly positively associated with both subjective well-being and meaning in life. Even when using a bifactor approach that isolated the specific variance in subjective well-being and meaning (see Supplemental Table S23), there was no consistent evidence that moral character was more strongly associated with meaning than with subjective well-being.

Why might this be? Whereas it makes intuitive sense that pleasure and enjoyment (i.e., happiness) are different from a "deeper" sense of coherence, purpose, and significance (i.e., meaning), in practice, in everyday life, there are very few experiences that are happy but not meaningful or meaningful but not happy (Choi et al., 2017). Previous research has isolated some unique correlates of meaning versus happiness by partialling out their shared variance (Baumeister et al., 2013) or by asking participants to recall or pursue "happy but not meaningful" or "meaningful but not happy" experiences (Dwyer et al., 2017). However, the latter approach may have exaggerated the apparent differences between these constructs: When participants are asked simply to recall or pursue experiences that are either happy or meaningful (without pulling the concepts apart by adding the "but not meaningful/happy" instruction), the differences between happiness and meaning tend to be minimal (Dwyer et al., 2017). Thus, the substantial overlap between the subjective experiences of happiness and meaning may explain why moral character was similarly associated with both.

If morality was the primary source of meaning in life but only one of many sources of happiness, then morality would be more strongly associated with meaning than with happiness. However, there are many nonmoral sources of meaning as well, including intellectual and aesthetic pursuits (Wolf, 1997a), a sense of belonging (Lambert et al., 2013), financial resources (Ward & King, 2016), positive affect (King et al., 2006), and daily routines (Heintzelman & King, 2019). Thus, our finding that morality is no more associated with meaning than with happiness concords with the emerging contemporary perspective that the subjective experience of meaning in life is commonplace and has many potential inputs (King et al., 2016).

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations and Recommended Usage of the Moral Character Index

We developed a moral character index for the purposes of this project. The resulting measure, which we used in Studies 1 and 3, captures a broad conceptualization of moral character that is morally relevant according to U.S.-based participants. Compared to previous measures (e.g., the MCQ; Furr et al., 2022), our new measure captures a more comprehensive set of moral character dimensions. However, given the difficulty of measuring moral character (Sun & Schwitzgebel, 2024), our measure also has limitations. First, while our measure captures a broad conceptualization of moral character (including the facets of general morality, compassion, respectfulness, honesty, interpersonal fairness, fraud avoidance, loyalty, and dependability), we do not claim that it captures all moral virtues. Second, although we derived kindness and integrity subfactors, a two-factor model did not fit particularly well (see Supplemental Table S10), and a comprehensive exploration of the structure of moral character was beyond the scope of this article.

Future moral character scale development efforts should (a) consider incorporating a broader range of moral virtues (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and (b) uncover the best-fitting factor structure for the resulting measure (e.g., Partsch et al., 2022). In the meanwhile, until a better measure of overall moral character exists, we believe that our scale is appropriate for research purposes where a relatively broad and brief measure of overall moral character is needed and for populations that are culturally similar to the United States. For example, we have no reason to expect that Australian, British, or German participants would have radically different ideas about the moral relevance of kindness, honesty, fairness, and dependability. However, given that other virtues (e.g., purity) can be morally important in specific cultural contexts, we recommend conducting a moral relevance norming study in the relevant population before using our measure in populations that have a larger cultural distance from the United States (Muthukrishna et al., 2020).

Beyond Moral Reputation

Although reputation-based measures of morality have substantial advantages over both self-report and behavioral measures, they also have their own limitations. First, by definition, reputation-based measures of moral character only allow us to draw conclusions about the well-being implications of being (im)moral in ways that are observable to others. How significant a limitation this is depends on how readily people can hide their immoral traits and behaviors from others. We suspect that while people may be able to conceal some specific immoral behaviors (Slepian & Koch, 2021), it is a much harder task to permanently conceal one's genuinely immoral character (Leckelt et al., 2015). If this is true, then reputation-based measures of moral character are unlikely to be substantially distorted in this respect. It is also possible that some moral traits are more concealable than others. Whereas a good liar might be perceived as highly honest insofar as they do not get caught, a truly compassionate person must demonstrate this through everyday acts of kindness that are difficult to fake over the long term. However, associations with well-being tended to be similar for the kindness and integrity subdimensions (see Supplemental Table S24), which suggests that any potential differences in observability did not render informant reports invalid.

A second potential limitation of reputation-based measures is that moral character judgments could be tainted by irrelevant information. For example, it is plausible that people might use how much they like a person as a heuristic for whether that person is morally good. However, supplemental analyses suggested that the association between moral character and well-being tends to be robust even when accounting for how much the targets' informants liked them (see Supplemental Table S34). Moreover, given that positive moral character information causally increases perceivers' overall positive impressions of a hypothetical target (Goodwin et al., 2014), the extent to which a perceiver likes a target could be a *mechanism* through which moral people are happier, rather than a confound.

Relatedly, if people strongly intuit that moral people are happier, observers may have partially based their moral character judgments on how happy their targets seem to be. Or, perhaps there is a general "halo" effect (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), such that observers believe that happy people have more positive traits in general (including morality). However, as there was nothing in our study designs that made the concept of happiness salient to nominators or their informants (who were not asked to opine on the targets' happiness before rating their moral character), we see little reason why it would occur to either group to consider targets' happiness when nominating them on the basis of their morality or when judging whether they "Consistently tell the truth" or "Would never accept a bribe, even if it were very large" (for example). Moreover, the discriminant validity results of Study 3 showed that nominators' judgments were based on morally relevant traits (e.g., *honest*, *kind*, *trustworthy*, *fair*) more so than on less morally relevant traits (including *happy* and other evaluative traits such as *intelligent*, *athletic*, and *physically attractive*; see Supplemental Figure S4). For further discussion and additional analyses pertaining to this issue, see Section 7 of the Supplemental Material.

Nevertheless, future studies could use objective behavioral criteria to examine whether nonreputational measures of moral character are also associated with well-being. For example, are people who have pledged to donate a large proportion of their lifetime incomes (Giving What We Can, 2023; The Giving Pledge, 2023), altruistic kidney donors, or other moral exemplars who have been identified on the basis of moral behaviors (e.g., volunteering, activism, environmentalism, acts of exceptional bravery; MacFarquhar, 2016; Walker & Frimer, 2007) happier than demographically matched comparison participants who have not engaged in such moral acts?

Establishing Causality

Due to the correlational nature of our study designs, the findings of all three studies are causally ambiguous. However, given the paucity of research on the question under investigation and the difficulty of manipulating moral character, our primary goal was to provide a thorough description of the direction, functional form, and specificity of the association between morality and well-being. After all, before we can attempt to explain a phenomenon, it is important to "know the thing we are trying to explain" (Asch, 1987, as cited in Rozin, 2001). Our theorizing focused on reasons why morality might influence happiness, but there are also plausible reasons why (un)happiness could cause people to be more (im)moral, as well as potential third-variable explanations. For example, unhappy people may be too preoccupied with their own distress to be concerned about others. As suggested by the popular adage, "Hurt people hurt people," certain negative emotions, such as anger or jealousy, could also lead to impulsive immoral acts (e.g., aggression; Leary et al., 2006; Wilkowski & Robinson, 2010). On the flipside, experimental evidence suggests that certain positive emotions can also increase prosocial behavior (for a review, see Aknin et al., 2018). Future studies could further investigate the causal impacts of morality on well-being by examining whether and how much a moral character intervention increases well-being (e.g., Levine & Cohen, 2018).

Uncovering Moderators

Finally, future studies should uncover the individual and contextual factors that moderate the association between moral character and well-being. At the individual level, past work has showed that success within various life domains (e.g., academics, social life) is more strongly associated with global life satisfaction to the extent that people value these life domains (Oishi et al., 1999). In line with this value fulfillment perspective (see also DeYoung & Tiberius, 2023), moral character may be more strongly associated with well-being for people who care more about being moral (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Similarly, self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) would predict that a smaller *discrepancy* between one's actual and ideal levels of morality—rather than actual morality per se—would predict greater well-being. The costs and benefits of being moral may also depend on one's social environment (Stavrova et al., 2013). For example, in highly competitive environments in which resources are scarce, prioritizing ethical considerations over one's own interests may cause more moral people to lose out on opportunities or be exploited by less moral people. In contrast, in communities that prioritize moral values, adhering to community moral standards may be crucial for social acceptance.

Conclusions

Philosophers have long debated whether there is a trade-off between morality and happiness, but little empirical evidence addresses this basic question. The present research breaks new ground by providing

the most comprehensive evidence to date on this question. It reveals a positive and general association between reputation-based measures of everyday moral character and self-reported well-being in the United States and China. These associations were generally robust when controlling for key demographic variables (including religiosity) and informant-reported liking. Our findings refute the idea that a moral life is necessarily characterized by onerous self-sacrifice; instead, morality and subjective experiences of personal fulfillment seem to go hand in hand. This research provides a foundation for future studies to uncover causal explanations, to establish moderators, and to examine the generality of these associations across alternative operationalizations of morality.

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