

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>**Dossier “Emotions from a relational perspective”****Epistemic feelings in moral experiences and moral dynamics of everyday life*****Sylvia Terpe**

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Submission date: October 2015**Accepted date:** November 2015**Published in:** January 2016**Abstract**

The philosophy of emotions has identified a class of affective phenomena called epistemic feelings (e.g. certainty, doubt, or surprise). Such feelings are thought to inform about the quality of one's knowledge and beliefs and to influence processes of knowledge acquisition and belief formation (1). I shall argue that these feelings also inform about the quality of one's (moral) emotions and hence are important to understand everyday moral experiences and the moral dynamics resulting from them. The works of Hans Joas are a good starting point to substantiate this argument, because he relates, albeit implicitly, some epistemic feelings to particular moral experiences (2). Inspired by this analysis of Joas, I differentiate between three ideal typical moral dynamics (moral elaboration, moral relativization and moral closure), which can be induced by specific moral experiences (3). The empirical study of epistemic feelings presents some challenges (4). But such an endeavour promises to increase our understanding of processes of moral reproduction and transformation, and of the development of phenomena like moral dogmatism, moral opportunism, and moral scepticism (5).

Keywords

epistemic feelings, moral experiences, moral dynamics

Sentiments epistemològics en les experiències morals i dinàmiques morals en la vida quotidiana**Resum**

La filosofia de les emocions ha identificat una classe de fenomen afectiu anomenat sentiments epistemològics (com ara la certesa, el dubte o la sorpresa). Es considera que aquests sentiments informen sobre la qualitat del coneixement i les creences d'una persona i influeixen els processos d'adquisició de coneixement i formació de creences (1). Debatré que aquests sentiments també informen sobre la qualitat de les emocions (morals) d'una persona i, per això, són importants per comprendre les experiències morals quotidianes i les dinàmiques morals que en resulten. Els treballs de Hans Joas són un bon punt de partida per corroborar aquest argument, ja que relaciona, implícitament això sí, alguns sentiments epistemològics amb experiències morals particulars (2). Inspirat per aquesta

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Epistemic feelings in moral experiences and moral dynamics...

anàlisi de Joas, diferencio entre tres dinàmiques morals típiques ideals (elaboració moral, relativització moral i clausura moral), que es poden induir a través d'experiències morals específiques (3). L'estudi empíric dels sentiments epistemològics presenta alguns reptes (4). Tanmateix, aquesta labor promet incrementar la nostra comprensió tant dels processos de reproducció i transformació moral com del desenvolupament dels fenòmens, com ara el dogmatisme moral, l'oportunisme moral i l'escepticisme moral (5).

Paraules clau

sentiments epistemològics, experiències morals, dinàmiques morals

1. Epistemic Feelings

Imagine that you are chatting about movies with a friend. At some point in the conversation you want to tell that friend about one movie in particular, because the lead actor gave a great performance, but you cannot remember the title of the movie nor the name of the actor. Nevertheless you have the feeling that both are somewhere in your head; you just cannot get a hold of them at that very moment. You have then a so-called tip-of-the-tongue feeling, i.e. the experience that you know something, but that you cannot retrieve it at that precise moment. The tip-of-the-tongue experience belongs to the class of epistemic feelings which has attracted growing attention in the philosophy of emotions in recent years (Arango-Munoz, 2014; Arango-Munoz and Michaelian, 2014; de Sousa, 2008a; Engel and Meylan, 2012; Morton, 2010). Philosophers still discuss which particular affective states belong to this group, and whether and why they qualify as feelings or emotions (I use these terms as synonyms here). However, the following states are recurrently addressed as epistemic feelings or epistemic emotions in this literature: The “feeling of certainty” (de Sousa, 2008a, p. 191) which is also called the “feeling of confidence” (Arango-Munoz and Michaelian, 2014, p. 98f.) and which is equivalent –as I will argue later– to the feeling that something is “evident” (Joas, 2000, p. 9f.). In opposition to this state of certainty, confidence or evidence is the feeling of “doubt” (de Sousa, 2008, p. 191) which is also called the “feeling of uncertainty” (Arango-Munoz and Michaelian, 2014, p. 101). Another epistemic feeling is that of “wonder” (de Sousa, 2008: 191), and I tend to regard “surprise” (Arango-Munoz and Michaelian, 2014, p. 112f.) and “astonishment” (Joas, 2002, p. 513) as equivalent states. Other often-mentioned epistemic feelings include curiosity and interest, the feeling of familiarity and the experience of déjà vu, as well as the feeling of understanding, which is also called the aha or eureka feeling. This is not an exhaustive list of epistemic feelings, but hopefully it gives “the reader a sense of the potential scope of the category” (Arango-Munoz and Michaelian, 2014, p. 103) –whereby this ‘sense’ itself is just another way of expressing the aforementioned feeling of understanding. Furthermore, I propose adding another state to the class of epistemic feelings, one as yet unaddressed in the literature: that of a hunch. If someone has a

hunch, this person has a vague, not yet clearly-formed idea or belief about something; but this particular hunch can motivate the person to attend to the issue more closely. In fact, it was a hunch about epistemic feelings being important to understand everyday moral experiences that prompted me to look into the connections between these feelings and morality in more detail.

According to philosophical research, epistemic feelings are characterized by two interrelated features. Firstly, epistemic feelings are seen to inform about “the quality of one’s knowledge [... and to] how much confidence can be placed in what one believes” (de Sousa, 2008a, p. 186). For instance, feelings of certainty and evidence often refer to (explicit and implicit) taken-for-granted knowledge. In contrast, doubt and uncertainty indicate that existing knowledge and beliefs are getting shaky, while surprise, wonder, and having a hunch may announce new, but not yet clearly articulated knowledge and beliefs. Furthermore, I suggest that epistemic feelings not only address the quality of one’s knowledge and beliefs, but also the quality of one’s emotions. For instance, one person may be very certain about his/her feelings of guilt, while another may have doubts about whether his/her guilt is justified or whether it is guilt at all, and not shame, anger or some other emotion that he/she is feeling. Still another person may just have a hunch about a (moral) emotion, but he/she cannot (and maybe does not want to) name it. A similar idea was formulated by Morton: “[o]ften an emotion has no conscious affect. This is most likely when we do not want to know that we are subject to it. [...] Quite often when this is the case, the unconscious emotion will generate an epistemic emotion of which the person is conscious, and this will be a clue for the person about the existence of the primary emotion.” (Morton, 2010, p. 397). Like Morton, I suggest that epistemic feelings may indicate already existing emotions; furthermore, they may also indicate just emerging emotions, and they may change the emotional experience itself, for instance, from an unconscious or unspecific sensation into a conscious emotion.

The latter point refers to the second feature of epistemic feelings mentioned in the philosophical literature, namely their potential to influence mental processes “such as perception, reasoning, and memory” (Arango-Munoz and Michaelian, 2014, p. 106); they “play a role in the guidance of (intellectual) activity” (de Sousa, 2008a, p. 186) and in “the acquisition of

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Epistemic feelings in moral experiences and moral dynamics...

beliefs" (Morton, 2010, p. 386). For instance, feelings such as wonder, curiosity and doubt are seen as activating the mind and fostering processes of thinking. In contrast, the feeling of certainty is often thought to block deliberation –or as de Sousa states: "[t]he feeling of certainty freezes inquiry" (de Sousa, 2008a, p. 191): if a person feels certain about something, i.e. if something is evident or obvious to him/her, there seems to be no need to explore or explain it further (I will come back to this issue in the context of moral values). Moreover, and as indicated above, I claim that epistemic feelings influence not only mental processes, but that they also shape the emotional experiences people are going through. For instance, epistemic feelings of certainty and confidence may confirm, and thus maintain and even intensify, a particular emotional experience; on the other hand, feelings of doubt and uncertainty and also a hunch may change the emotions one is experiencing (see section 3).

2. The Link between Epistemic Feelings and Morality

In contemporary research on morality it is a commonplace that morality and emotions are tightly intertwined. Although there is much debate on how to conceptualize and conduct empirical research on these connections, there is plenty of literature on the links between morality and emotions in the various social sciences (for sociology, see: Hitlin, 2008; Joas, 2000; for philosophy: Bagnoli, 2011; Taylor, 1992; de Sousa, 2008b; for psychology: Blasi, 1999; Haidt, 2001; for anthropology: Fassin, 2013; Throop, 2012), in which so-called moral emotions have attracted particular attention (see, eg Haidt, 2003; Malti and Latzko, 2012; Turner and Stets, 2007). These moral emotions include benign affective states like sympathy and empathy or gratitude and elevation, but also emotions like contempt, anger, and disgust, which may intensify conflict and separation between (groups of) people; furthermore, guilt, shame, and pride are prominent and widely-discussed moral emotions directed at a person's self. Yet in principle every emotion can become a 'moral' one if it is related to and expresses a person's moral horizon –as Durkheim already underlined, such emotions are "the surest sociological indicator of the actual validity of values" (Joas, 2000, p. 8); hence any study of morality would be incomplete if it leaves these emotional components out. However, the affective dimension of morality itself is only partially understood if limited to these moral emotions. Such a focus runs the risk of conceptually reducing morality to a "thin morality" of "moral judgments" (Abend, 2013, p. 180) –a critique which is particularly applicable to some fields of psychology and neuroscience. If instead one wants to study how morality is experienced in its manifold facets in everyday life (which includes, for instance, unreflective and taken-for-granted modes of moral practice as well as more or less developed ideas of a good life,

cf Abend, 2013; Bergson, 1935; Terpe, 2015; Zigon, 2007), it is necessary to pay closer attention to epistemic feelings. It is the main argument of this article that moral dynamics arising out of everyday moral experiences can be better understood if one takes into account how epistemic feelings work.

The existing literature has not made an explicit connection between epistemic feelings and morality, but implicit links can be found if one re-reads works on morality from this perspective: i.e. some authors relate moral phenomena to epistemic feelings, without having an explicit concept of them. Most fruitful in this respect are the considerations of Hans Joas. In fact, he begins his argument in the *Genesis of Values* with an observation that relates a particular epistemic feeling to (moral) values. In the first chapter Joas states: "[T]here are today [...] a great many individuals who are *absolutely certain* of their values [...]. Individual rights to freedom, conceptions of justice, the rejection of physical violence –all can [...] reckon with widespread approval" (Joas, 2000, p. 9f.; italics by S.T.). In a more general way he adds: "I take it we are all familiar with *the feeling that something evidently* and in an emotionally intense way *is to be evaluated as good or bad*" (Joas, 2000, p. 9f.; italics by S.T.). According to Joas, value commitments are not only underpinned by feelings of certainty and evidence (they are not only an addition to values), but these epistemic feelings are constitutive of the emergence, maintenance, and transformation of (moral) values. A similar argument was made by Ronald Dworkin in his reflections on the question of the conditions in which a position can be defined as a moral one. Opposing rational approaches to morality he states: "But do I really have to have a reason to make my position a matter of moral conviction? Most men think that acts which cause unnecessary suffering or break a serious promise with no excuse, are immoral, and yet they could give no reason for these beliefs. They *feel* that no reason is necessary, because they take *it as axiomatic or self-evident* that these are immoral acts" (Dworkin, 1991, 251f.; italics by S.T.). Though one has to add that epistemic feelings of certainty and evidence are not only typical for the (locally anchored) "universal moralit[ies]" (Joas, 2000, p. 174f.) mentioned in the quotes, but are also constitutive parts of moral "particularism[s]" (see section 3).

Joas' line of argument also gives a clue as to where to look for a different position, one which emphasizes epistemic feelings of doubt and uncertainty when considering morality. In fact, in his opening observation Joas rejects Zygmunt Bauman's diagnosis of the end of all moral certainties in contemporary Western societies (Bauman, 1993). Bauman's argument goes even beyond this empirical claim when he argues that certainty and morality exclude each other: "at the very moment one tries to find the way leading to *Eindeutigkeit* [...] one quits the territory of morality" (Bauman, 1998, p. 16). However, Bauman confuses a normative statement about what morality should be with empirical developments in contemporary societies. Joas makes clear that the contingencies of the 'modern' world do not necessarily lead to fundamental moral

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Epistemic feelings in moral experiences and moral dynamics...

doubt, because “the mere knowledge of [moral] alternatives does not [always] shake or unsettle our existing [moral] commitments” (Joas, 2004, p. 396). Yet, in spite of this justified critique of Bauman, one can make use of his position by translating his claims into questions which must be answered empirically. From a sociological perspective the question of which (kinds of) moral commitments in which spheres of life lose certainty and evidence and are called into question by moral doubt is an empirical one. While Bauman would expect such questioning to lead to fundamental moral uncertainty, Joas’ position enables one to see processes of moral transformation in which the interplay between doubt and evidence may lead to new moral articulations (see section 3).

Besides evidence and uncertainty, Joas mentions another epistemic feeling in relation to morality. In his reflections on processes of moral articulation he observes: “[T]here can [...] be a gap between our moral feelings [moral emotions, S.T.] and our reflective moral values. Perhaps we realize with *astonishment* that we fail to feel guilt or outrage even though we ourselves or others have infringed upon what we took to be our values” (Joas, 2002, p. 513; italics by S.T.). Accordingly, *astonishment* (or wonder and surprise) about the absence of a moral emotion can induce a moral articulation which may lead to moral transformation. In turn, the experience of certainty about, and evidence of, a moral emotion, as when one is “tormented by feelings of guilt or seized by outrage” may also induce *astonishment*, if one has “the impression that none of our consciously endorsed values has been infringed upon” (Joas, 2002, p. 513). Hence, according to Joas, the gap between moral emotions and reflective moral values is experienced via the epistemic feeling of surprise. Additionally, I assume that another kind of gap is experienced in the epistemic feeling of a hunch: occasionally people find themselves in situations in which they do not yet know whether this particular moment is morally relevant to them or not; rather, they just have a hunch that something important in moral terms might be going on. While Joas emphasizes that the “role of articulation consists precisely in bridging [...] such] gap[s]” (Joas, 2002, p. 513), one could also say, that (moral) articulations try to make sense of such epistemic feelings. In this way articulations “can produce a confirmation, a rejection, or a modification” of the moral emotions involved (Joas, 2002, p. 513), just as of the more or less reflected moral commitments and hence of one’s moral horizon.

3. Moral Dynamics in Everyday Life

Since epistemic feelings are related to particular moral experiences like the ones addressed in the last section, they may induce specific moral dynamics. In the following section I will outline a preliminary typology of three ideal-types of dynamic mechanisms; these have still to be developed further on a theoretical level as well as enriched (and probably modified) by empirical data. The main

criterion which differentiates the three dynamics is their respective combination of epistemic feelings of certainty and evidence, on the one hand, and the class of potentially ‘irritating’ epistemic feelings of uncertainty, doubt, wonder, surprise, *astonishment*, and the sense of a ‘hunch’, on the other hand.

The first dynamic, *moral elaboration*, is inspired by Joas’ ideas about moral articulation, which build mainly on the work of Charles Taylor (Joas, 2000, p. Chap. 8). Such articulations arise out of the experience of gaps like those mentioned above: either moral certainties are shaken by moments of doubt and surprise, or the sense of a hunch, and at times strong feelings of “intuitive certainty” (Joas, 2002, p. 512) suggest a moral interpretation of an initially ‘morally neutral’ situation. In the attempt to find an adequate articulation for such experiences, it is not only moral emotions that may change, but “in the process of articulation we can also modify our values or produce new ones” (Joas, 2000, p. 134) –that is why I call this dynamic ‘moral elaboration’. In other words: in processes of moral elaboration people try to re-phrase their (previous) moral commitments with the “vocabulary available in a given culture” (Joas, 2000, p. 134), but in a way that uses that vocabulary in a creative way so that it fits and is perceived as an adequate expression of one’s moral experience. At times, even “innovative forms [of moral elaboration] can perhaps be invented or borrowed from other cultures” (Joas, 2000, p. 134). Yet, while Joas has mostly fundamental and far-reaching processes of self-transcendence in mind, I emphasize the importance of the articulation of such gaps in processes of minor and gradual changes in a person’s moral horizon. Empirically, I would expect that such experiences take the shape of (more or less elaborated) questions like ‘How can I do good in that precise situation?’ or ‘What does it mean to be good in that moment?’ or ‘Is this an occasion about being or acting good or bad at all?’. What is important about the epistemic feelings involved is that in the articulation of such experiences “we strive for a harmony between several levels that we rarely, and never permanently, attain” (Joas, 2000, p. 135). This means that moral elaborations aim to regain moral certainty by adjusting one’s moral emotions and reflected moral values so that they fit each other –one can recognize Bauman’s moral ‘*Eindeutigkeit*’ here. However, according to Joas, such a state of moral certainty and evidence will only be temporary, lasting until the next time when it is shaken by a hunch, doubt, surprise or contradictory ‘intuitive certainty’.

The second dynamic, *moral relativization*, is dominated by epistemic feelings of doubt and uncertainty. It comes close to the processes which Bauman claims to be typical of ‘postmodern’ societies, but as an ideal-typical dynamic it is at first a theoretical category which has still to be confirmed and probably modified and specified by empirical research. Such empirical research is needed to interrogate in which particular situations, institutional settings, and spheres of life, as well as in relation to which specific moral ideas and commitments, do doubt and uncertainty predominate in

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people's moral experiences. I call this dynamic moral relativization, because I expect that people who are engulfed in it tend to emphasize that every issue can be viewed from many (moral) perspectives and that they use articulations like: 'what is moral for one person, is immoral for another and morally irrelevant for a third'. In moral relativization, the perception of moral plurality is coupled with an absence of epistemic evidence with regard to moral matters. While in its purest form it evokes fundamental moral scepticism, a less developed form enables a person to change his or her proclaimed moral values according to the situation. In such cases, one could speak of an opportunistic 'morality'. For both variants one might ask why people nevertheless refer to moral vocabularies. While they might do so for instrumental reasons, it is also possible that this arises from a still existing, but perhaps deeply hidden longing for moral certainty.

The third dynamic, *moral closure*, is characterized by strong epistemic feelings of certainty and evidence. It builds on the experience of feeling very confident about what is going on in moral terms: one just 'knows' what is right and wrong, or good and bad, and has no doubts or other perturbing sensations which might disturb this moral confidence. In such experiences, there is no gap between one's more or less reflective moral values and one's moral emotions; instead they reinforce each other and nurture the feeling of certainty and evidence. This leads to the confirmation and stabilizing of one's moral horizon, but in its purest form this dynamic induces moral dogmatization. Such dogmatization is characterized by the denial, ignorance or suppression of doubts, uncertainties or 'hunches'. Instead, alternative (non-)moral positions (which might provoke such disturbing feelings) are regarded as deviant and one's own moral values are defended as the only legitimate ones. This may not only apply to particularistic moral ideas, but 'moral universalism' can also be defended in a dogmatic way, for instance, if it denies local variations in the interpretation of its values and the relative weight attributed to them in specific situations. Hence moral closure tends to foster moral conflicts with other (groups of) people and at the same time it preserves an inner 'moral peace' by suspending the experience of moral dilemmas: because there is just one valid moral stance, there is no room for inner moral conflict.

Although *moral closure* can be regarded as the opposite of *moral relativization*, both dynamics are similar in their assumption that 'real morality' has to be unequivocal, only allowing one valid position. Due to this similarity, one could assume that at times people who experience moral uncertainties and relativizations in one phase or sphere of life may react to such experiences with an even stronger moral dogmatization in another phase or sphere. This highlights the fact that I do not regard these moral dynamics as stable characteristics of persons (as psychologists would tend to see it). Instead I relate them to situations, institutional settings, or spheres and phases of life and regard it a matter of empirical research as to which of the

Epistemic feelings in moral experiences and moral dynamics...

features or conditions present in these contexts tend to promote which variant of moral dynamics.

4. Challenges in the Empirical Study of Epistemic Feelings

The empirical study of epistemic feelings in real-life settings faces some difficulties. First of all, it is to be expected that people seldom talk about their epistemic feelings in a direct way. In everyday interactions as well as in qualitative interviews, people "regularly fail to spell out their emotions explicitly" (Kleres, 2010, p. 182), and this is likely to be the case with their epistemic feelings too. Moreover, such moments of reflection on epistemic feelings might not be the most relevant ones if one is interested in elucidating everyday moral dynamics which mostly work 'behind people's backs'. Besides direct verbal expressions, epistemic feelings may be expressed indirectly in other verbal statements. Hans Joas gives an example of the kinds of reactions in which the feeling of having evidence can be observed in an indirect way. He quotes from an interview in the well-known study by Robert Bellah and colleagues, in which the interviewee was asked to explain "why honesty was good and lying bad". The interviewee reacted as follows: "I don't know. It just is. It's just so basic. I don't want to be bothered with challenging that. It's part of me. I don't know where it came from, but it's very important." (Joas, 2000, p. 9) Joas interprets this answer as an expression of "helplessness and anger at this very helplessness" to explain one's own deepest values: because these values are felt to be so certain and evidently good for the interviewee, he feels no need to explore their roots any further (Joas, 2000, p. 9). On a methodological level this means that it is necessary to use the tools and instruments of narrative analysis in order to reveal the epistemic feelings, or any other emotions (Kleres, 2010), inherent in verbal expressions.

However, although one can begin to study epistemic feelings by looking at what people talk about and how they speak in qualitative interviews or real-life interactions, it may be advisable to go beyond such narrations and verbal expressions. There are two (interrelated) reasons for this. First of all, not all epistemic feelings are expressed verbally in a direct or indirect way; some are instead embodied, i.e. they remain implicit in what and how something is done in a given situation. For instance, epistemic feelings like doubt or a hunch may be expressed and revealed in hesitant, slow or interrupted body movements. Likewise, feelings of certainty and evidence may find their expression in particular postures and body language. Hence "[i]t is the very silence, the force of what is not said, that becomes increasingly prominent" (Katz, 2002, p. 268). Precise ethnographic observation is needed to grasp these embodied dimensions of epistemic feelings and to find a language for conveying such observations.

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The need to go beyond verbal articulations in the study of epistemic feelings is also due to the fact that the “linguistic, materially congealed culture of a people never grasps the active bases of conduct in the social world that produces the culture”, i.e. verbal articulation “effaces [at least partially; S.T.] the process of its creation” (Katz and Csordas, 2003, p. 285). Hence if one remains on the level of verbal articulations, it is, at best, possible to understand only the end of an experiential process as it is manifested in “the represented self” (Katz, 2002, p. 267). Although one cannot and should not dismiss the represented self as it presents itself in verbal expressions, one should be aware of the fact that the perceptions leading to a particular articulation are just part of the much more complex process of experience. In everyday life experiences, for every verbal expression and “[f]or everything we understand [...], we suppress a constant, infinite range of possible interpretations that flare up and are as quickly extinguished” (Katz, 2002, p. 263). That implies that people do not necessarily follow every epistemic feeling they experience: they may have a hunch but ignore it, they may have doubts, and at times even moments of ‘intuitive certainty’, but suppress them. The circumstances of a situation play a part in this. For instance, professional norms such as those followed by advocates supporting victims of domestic violence may prevent them from allowing in doubts about their clients’ stories, because they do not want to blame the victims (Delage, 2015, p. 98); if they felt a hunch or the slightest doubt, they would probably not engage with it. In general, empirical research is necessary on the specific social conditions (like professional norms, but also power relations, time restrictions, conventions and other kinds of rules) which detain people from lingering on some of their epistemic feelings, and instead make them sensitive and attentive to other ones, in this way inducing a particular moral dynamic.

Conclusion

The study of epistemic feelings in the field of morality offers two insights. Firstly, it expands our understanding of the manifold nature of moral experiences in everyday life. A promising starting point is Joas’ conception of moral experiences as a relation between more or less reflective moral emotions and more or less reflective moral values. From this perspective, epistemic feelings indicate specific instances of such relations. For instance, surprise in the face of a moral emotion may point to an as yet unformed or unelaborated value commitment; a hunch may indicate either deeply hidden, suppressed moral emotions (Morton, 2010, p. 397), or the emergence of new ones, for instance, in reaction to a hitherto abstract moral idea; while certainty may point to mutually-reinforcing moral emotions and values. Secondly, based on such an understanding of moral experiences, new insights are to be expected into processes of moral reproduction and confirmation,

Epistemic feelings in moral experiences and moral dynamics...

as well as into moral transformation and change. Psychology and sociology offer a vast amount of literature on moral development in childhood, yet there have been few attempts to conceptualize moral processes in adult life (eg Burke and Stets, 2009, chap. 9). Again, Joas is a good starting point, but his focus is on experiences of self-transcendence, i.e. on all-embracing transformations in a person’s moral horizon. Yet by including epistemic feelings in his conception it is possible to get a clearer picture of the processual character of moral confirmations in everyday life and hence of the minor and gradual changes in moral horizons. This, in turn, promises to increase our understanding of phenomena like moral scepticism, moral opportunism, and moral dogmatism.

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Epistemic feelings in moral experiences and moral dynamics...

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Epistemic feelings in moral experiences and moral dynamics...



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