Building a Developmental Science of Redemption

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Abstract

Stories about redemption are ubiquitous; people emphasize moral improvement when describing their own lives and, often, others' lives as well. However, psychology does not yet have a well-developed literature concerning redemption, and developmental science has not addressed questions regarding how perceptions of redemption might emerge or change between childhood and adulthood. To the extent that past research has spoken to this issue, it has pointed in contradictory directions. Two different theories—focusing on essentialism and on optimism—make two different developmental predictions about how and why judgments of redemption might change with age. Integrating these perspectives, we propose a novel theory of redemption that puts work on essentialism and optimism in conversation with each other. The theory of redemption further highlights the role of social inputs (e.g., experiences with their own and others' moral change) as mechanisms that can lead children to hold more redemptive views than do adults. The theory of redemption accounts for previous findings in developmental science and makes novel predictions regarding the social inputs and consequences of redemptive views.
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Building a Developmental Science of Redemption

People hunger for stories about redemption—stories about people who have become morally better than they used to be. Redemptive narratives appear in stories that we consume about others as well as the tales we tell about our own lives (Buhler & Dunlop, 2019; McAdams, 2013; Perlin & Fivush, 2021). People who are in recovery talk about having harmed others during their addiction and make the point that the recovery process helped them to change their character for the better (Dunlop & Tracy, 2013). People who have experienced the dissolution of a romantic relationship highlight the positive outcomes of their break-up, such as learning how to create stronger relationships in the future (Slotter & Ward, 2015). And we all strive to achieve a more ideal version of ourselves, one that is more moral than our past and current selves (Higgins, 1987).

However, to date, psychological science has not focused on how people understand redemption or make decisions about when someone has been redeemed. To the extent that past work on other topics can inform theorizing on redemption, two separate research areas within developmental science—each relevant to the question of how perceptions of redemption change with age, but neither centrally concerning itself with redemption directly—make contradictory predictions. This paper brings together these areas—one focusing on essentialism, the other on optimism—to propose a novel theory of redemption. This theory posits that children receive social input suggesting that people can change for the better. From this input, children learn that people who have transgressed can become fundamentally different (and morally better) people over time. In line with constructivist theories portraying children as active learners (e.g., Bruner, 1961; Piaget, 1971; Rogoff, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978), the theory of redemption suggests that children actively interpret and make sense of the input they receive. The current model does not

position children as passive absorbers of information in their environment but argues, rather, that children use social inputs to help them construct their understanding of redemption. In contrast, adults receive far less input indicating that people can improve and hold less redemptive views than do children.

By bringing two sets of prior results that may appear contradictory into conversation with each other, the theory of redemption can help psychological science better explain observed phenomena (e.g., how it can be the case that children both perceive moral badness as an unchanging feature of someone's innermost "essence" and also expect people to change for the better). Further, by clarifying perceptions regarding people's capacity for moral improvement, the theory of redemption explains a basic feature of the human condition—how people can continue living together in society with those who have caused harm.

What is Redemption and What is it Not?

To the extent that psychology has investigated redemption, it has typically focused on *redemptive narratives*, or stories that people tell about their own and others' lives (see Perlin & Fivush, 2021, for an overview). In his foundational work on this topic, McAdams (2013) defined redemption in broad terms as "a deliverance from suffering to a better world" (p. xiv). Focusing on autobiographical narratives, he pointed out that many adults tell stories about their own lives using the following structure: they experience good fortune but notice that others do not have this same experience and instead encounter suffering. The story-tellers then become motivated to reduce this suffering—for instance, by working toward racial equality, trying to eliminate poverty, or make the world better in some other way. While trying to achieve their goals, they encounter many obstacles. However, and crucially for a *redemptive* story, these obstacles lead to positive outcomes. For instance, a person may tell a story about having many conversations over

multiple years with a racist relative, ultimately causing that relative to change their views and growing closer to their relative in the process. Without the obstacle, the positive outcome (reduced racial animus, a closer relationship) would not have occurred. According to the stories told by McAdams's (2013) participants, redemption involves an experience of suffering or transgression that ultimately leads to better conditions than those that existed originally. Building on this perspective, Perlin and Fivush (2021) distinguished between *emergent redemption*, in which people describe a change for the better, and *return redemption*, in which people describe a return to an originally good state. For instance, a story in which a conversation with a racist relative helps that relative achieve a level of egalitarianism that they had never previously achieved would illustrate emergent redemption. In contrast, a story where the same conversation increases egalitarianism among a relative who used to hold a relatively low amount of bias and then acquired more racist ideas would serve as an example of return redemption. Other scholars working in this tradition have defined redemptive narratives similarly as stories where "negative and challenging experiences ultimately give way to positive endings and prosocial behavior" (Dunlop, 2022, p. 213) or as tales "focused on positive outcomes in negative situations" (Slotter & Ward, 2015, p. 737).

Building on this prior work concerning the stories people tell about redemption, the current paper conceptualizes redemption as *moral improvement following transgression*. Conceptually, this improvement could reflect an entirely new state (akin to emergent redemption) or a return to a previously good state (akin to return redemption); the common denominator in either case is that redemption reflects moral improvement compared to the state of affairs when transgression was occurring. However, in our view, even a return to a previously good state has elements of emergent redemption. For instance, imagine a person who, as a young

adult, had a diverse group of friends and held racially progressive views. In midlife, this person began watching news shows that convinced her to adopt racist stereotypes; as a result, she withdrew from her friendships with minoritized individuals and voted for politicians who supported policies that harmed non-White communities. If this person changes yet again later in life and comes to see the errors of her racist ways, her older self is not the same as her young adult self. Having come to know White supremacy in a personal way, perhaps her commitment to justice later in life runs deeper, and her struggle for a better world is more effective; having seen what racism can do inside an individual life can be a strong motivator that she previously lacked (for evidence of these processes in the lives of people who have espoused White supremacy, see Saslow, 2018; Suitts, 2005). Or, perhaps her contact with White supremacy informs her later actions in a different way; she made new friends and acquired new worldviews in midlife that do not entirely leave her, even after she takes steps to move away from them (for evidence that ideologies can continue to shape cognition and behavior even after people no longer endorse them, see Heiphetz & Oishi, 2022; Van Tongeren et al., 2021). Regardless, journeys change people; once they have undertaken the journey, it may not be possible to fully return to exactly who they were before they set off.

Our definition is narrower and more parsimonious than the general one offered by McAdams (2013), which emphasized suffering and positive outcomes broadly rather than focusing specifically on morally relevant harms and moral improvement. Yet, this focus on morality is consistent with many of the examples cited by McAdams (2013) and the stories told by his participants and participants in other research (Bluck & Gluck, 2004; Ellis, 2023; Harding et al., 2017; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2019). For instance, people have discussed the wrongdoings they committed while addicted to alcohol and other drugs and noted that the process of recovery

helped them to become better people (Bush, 1999; McGregor, 1978). Others have described using transgressions they experienced in prior romantic relationships (as the victim, the offender, or both) to make improvements in their lives, including acting more morally in current relationships (McAdams, 2013; Slotter & Ward, 2015).

Redemption is related to, but distinct from, the concept of forgiveness. Both are responses to an initial transgression, but they are different types of responses. Forgiveness is a motivational (McCullough, 2009) or affective (Worthington & Scherer, 2004) response that includes changing one's orientation toward people who have caused harm. For instance, forgiveness can involve a reduction in the motivation to avoid or injure the transgressor. Forgiveness can also involve replacing negative emotions toward the transgressor, such as anger or hurt feelings, with more neutral or positive emotions. In contrast, redemption involves a *cognitive appraisal* of the transgressor. It is the belief—perhaps motivated, at least in part, by a desire to see oneself and others as fundamentally good people (Strohminger et al., 2017)—that a person who has transgressed can change for the better and need not continue transgressing in the same way in the future. Forgiveness and redemption can coexist; for instance, victims may believe that transgressors can change, and this belief may facilitate positive feelings toward transgressors. However, forgiveness and redemption need not co-occur. For instance, victims can believe that transgressors can become better people, yet still feel angry with and/or avoid transgressors in the present. Or, victims can seek closeness with transgressors and feel positively toward them despite the belief that they will continue transgressing in the future. This process sometimes occurs in romantic relationships, where forgiveness actually *increases* future transgressions in some circumstances (McNulty, 2019).

Forgiveness and redemption also differ in whom they involve. Some conceptualize forgiveness as the prerogative of the victim, arguing that people who have not experienced harm as a result of a particular transgression cannot forgive that transgression (for discussion, see Cherry, 2023; Wiesenthal, 1969). In contrast, redemptive beliefs are available to everyone. Third-party observers can view transgressors as capable of moral improvement even if those observers lack the standing to forgive transgressors that they did not personally experience.

Like forgiveness, redemption has been the purview of religion rather than psychology (Ayoub, 2011; Buber, 1967; Ellis, 2023; Ruttenberg, 2022). However, like forgiveness, redemption need not be limited to the domain of religion. As illustrated above, laypeople use redemptive frameworks to describe secular experiences such as alcoholism and divorce. Below, we discuss connections between lay notions of redemption and religious cognition. However, the theory of redemption accounts for a fundamental psychological process—the notion that people who have transgressed can change for the better—and is not limited to religious contexts. Rather, ideas about redemption are a basic aspect of moral cognition that people use to understand the social world in which they live.

The Need for a Science of Redemption

Because transgressions are common in everyday life (e.g., Hofmann et al., 2018), people have many opportunities to make judgments about redemption. However, the language of redemption does not appear often in scientific writing. Psychologists have conducted research on many aspects of morality, including people's expectations regarding others' moral and immoral behaviors (e.g., Bian et al., 2018; Sommerville et al., 2013), their evaluations of particular behaviors as blameworthy or praiseworthy (e.g., Elenbaas, 2019; Heiphetz et al., 2015; Van de Vondervoort & Hamlin, 2016), their punitive responses to others who have transgressed (e.g.,

Cushman, 2015; Martin & Heiphetz, 2021; McAuliffe & Dunham, 2021), and their own moral and immoral actions (e.g., Crockett et al., 2014; Dahl, 2015; Dunfield et al., 2011; Vaish et al., 2016). However, psychology as a field has not substantially considered the socio-cognitive underpinnings of people's capacity to observe a transgression and hold out the possibility that the person who transgressed can change for the better, nor has prior work probed the developmental mechanisms that might underlie perceptions of redemption.

Yet, people's everyday transgressions—i.e., behaviors that create the possibility for redemption in the first place—raise a fundamental question: How do we make decisions about whether people have made their past wrongs right? Because we all transgress in the context of our daily lives, how we answer this question is crucial for social life. We overextend ourselves at work and snap at our beloved families when we come home at the end of the day. We forget our friends' birthdays and make them feel unimportant even though nothing could be further from the truth. We promise to do fifty things in a week that can hold ten at best and let down more people than we thought was possible. If we had no way to fix our wrongs and communicate that we had changed so much that we would no longer transgress in the same ways, our relationships would suffer irreparable damage every time we committed even minor transgressions, in part because the people we harmed would respond as though we would continue to harm them in the same ways forever. In this scenario, it would be difficult—perhaps impossible—to coexist with others.

Morality is fundamentally relational. People behave morally or immorally toward others (Young & Tsoi, 2013), and several theories of morality describe it as "for" cooperation and relational flourishing (Hamlin, 2013; Leach & Iyer, 2024; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Therefore, a science that seeks to understand how social beings exist together should have something to say about how we respond when the people with whom we try to co-exist fall short of moral

perfection. In particular, a field that is curious about social life ought to understand how people remain in community with one another even after transgressing against each other. This paper seeks to lay out a framework to aid such understanding.

The Importance of a Developmental Approach to Understanding Redemption

Starting early in development, transgressions are a common feature of children's lives. Within the first year of life, infants can distinguish pro-social versus anti-social behavior and typically prefer individuals who perform kind, helpful actions (e.g., Hamlin et al., 2007; Margoni & Surian, 2018; Sommerville, 2018). As toddlers and preschoolers, children perform both pro-social behaviors (Chernyak & Kushnir, 2013; McAuliffe et al., 2017; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006) and transgressions (Smith et al., 2013; Wainryb et al., 2005; Waugh & Brownell, 2017). Because children's transgressions commonly occur in social settings with peers, children have experienced numerous everyday violations of moral norms by the time they enter elementary school: they have harmed others (Smith et al., 2013; Wainryb et al., 2005; Waugh & Brownell, 2017), been the victims of others' harmful actions (Ingram & Bering, 2010; Wainryb et al., 2005), and observed one person harming another (Smetana et al., 1999; Tisak et al., 1996). The types of transgressions that commonly occur in children's lives, such as destroying an object that belongs to someone else or calling someone a mean name, may seem relatively mild to adults. Nevertheless, these behaviors are important and meaningful to children (e.g., Hardecker et al., 2016; Josephs et al., 2016; Vaish et al., 2011). Thus, the opportunity to see others as redeemed—or as unredeemable—presents itself early in life.

Past work on children's perceptions of transgressions has largely focused on judgments of right and wrong. Piaget's classic work distinguished between early-emerging heteronomous morality, in which children between the approximate ages of 5 to 9 years old view rules as

imposed by external authorities and unalterable, and later-emerging autonomous morality, in which children older than approximately 9 years of age perceive rules as created by humans and therefore changeable (Piaget, 1932). Building on this work, Kohlberg (1984) proposed three broad moral stages in which children moved from pre-conventional reasoning (e.g., judgments based on avoiding punishment) to conventional reasoning (e.g., judgments based on social norms) and in which adults sometimes showed evidence of post-conventional reasoning (e.g., judgments based on abstract moral principles). This classic work and more recent findings lay the foundation for understanding judgments of redemption by clarifying how children think about transgressions. For instance, children who are reasoning based on heteronomous morality may perceive behaviors that go against an authority's will as a greater transgression than individuals who are reasoning based on autonomous morality, and younger children may therefore be more likely than older children to believe that people who violate an authority's wishes need redemption (for more recent work on the role of authority in moral judgments, see Li & Koenig, in press; Stavans & Baillargeon, 2019). Relatedly, Kohlberg's work and later studies on what constitutes a moral violation in children's minds (e.g., Lee & Solomon, in press; Yucel et al., 2022) clarify people's reasoning about *why* someone may need redemption. For instance, someone reasoning at a pre-conventional level may judge that anyone who has received punishment is need of redemption, whereas someone reasoning at a conventional level may place more emphasis on violations of norms. Although this past work has not examined the development of reasoning about redemption *per se*, it sets the stage for understanding age-related changes in ideas about redemption by investigating how individuals of different ages reason about transgressions.

More recently, developmental psychology has produced two separate literatures relevant to the question of how judgments concerning people's capacity for moral improvement might change across age. However, these literatures make different claims and rarely speak to one another. First, work on *psychological essentialism* leads to the prediction that younger children will show less redemptive judgments than older children and adults. Second, work on *optimism* leads to the opposite prediction, suggesting that younger children will be particularly likely to judge that people who have transgressed are redeemable and can become better over time. While both theories have garnered strong empirical support, bringing them into conversation with each other results in apparently contradictory predictions about how children, versus adults, would respond to transgressions. Below, we discuss each of these literatures and then propose a novel framework to integrate these seemingly contradictory results into a theory of redemption.

Psychological Essentialism

Philosophers have long posited that objects possess an essence that distinguishes them from other objects that may share superficial features. This idea, dating back to Plato's theory of forms, describes a permanent, unchangeable essence that is integral to an object's identity and function, without which that thing would not be the kind of thing it is. Psychologists are less concerned with the metaphysical question of whether essences actually exist and instead investigate the psychological question of whether laypeople believe they exist and how these beliefs shape responses toward others. Psychological essentialism, or simply "essentialism" for brevity, is the idea that certain characteristics arise from internal essences that distinguish individuals who have a particular characteristic from those who do not (Medin & Ortony, 1989; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). Prior research has highlighted multiple components of essentialism, including the perception that characteristics have sharp category boundaries (people either have

the characteristic or they do not; the characteristic does not occur on a continuum) and inductive potential (knowing whether or not a person has the characteristic in question licenses additional inferences about them, such as what kind of person they are overall) and that they are central to identity, innate, rooted in biology, and immutable (Gelman, 2003; Haslam et al., 2002). For instance, individuals who hold an essentialist view of race could posit that this category is innate, genetic, and unchanging across time (Jayaratne et al., 2006; Mandalaywala et al., 2019; Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). In contrast, individuals who hold a non-essentialist view could perceive race as socially learned (e.g., through a process of racial socialization, which teaches children what race is and what it means to be a member of a particular racial group; Hughes et al., 2006) and malleable (e.g., the same individual could be categorized differently in different cultures or different time periods; Ignatiev, 1995; López, 2006).

More recently, scholars working at the intersection of psychology and philosophy have proposed that essentialism can also encompass the view that a particular characteristic is central to identity (e.g., Brambilla & Leach, 2014) and that if that characteristic were to change, the person would become someone else entirely (e.g., Christy et al., 2019; De Freitas et al., 2018). Work along these lines has shown that children (e.g., Heiphetz et al., 2018; Lefebvre & Krettenauer, 2020) and adults (e.g., Heiphetz, Strohminger, et al., 2017; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014) perceive morality as especially central, reasoning that people would change drastically if their moral characteristics changed and far less if they underwent changes to non-moral characteristics such as their personal preferences. This effect emerges, at least in part, because people judge that changes to moral characteristics—especially those shared with many other people, such as beliefs about whether murder is wrong—would alter social relationships more

than would changes to other types of characteristics and people perceive social relationships to inform personal identity (Heiphetz, Strohminger, et al., 2017). That is, people define themselves in part based on relationships with others (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Turner et al., 1979); therefore, changes to these relationships are perceived to change personal identity.

Despite the fact that essentialism regarding human characteristics does not always align with scientific evidence (e.g., Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017), evidence of essentialism emerges in a number of domains ranging from species (e.g., Gelman & Wellman, 1991; Medin & Atran, 2004) to social categories such as race and gender (e.g., Jayaratne et al., 2006; Mandalaywala et al., 2019; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008) to psychological characteristics such as shyness and curiosity (e.g., Gelman et al., 2007; Heyman & Diesendruck, 2002) to mental states such as religious beliefs (e.g., Chalik et al., 2017; Heiphetz, Gelman, et al., 2017). In these domains, preschoolers and children in early elementary school typically express relatively high levels of essentialism that decline across age (e.g., Diesendruck et al., 2013; Gelman et al., 2007; Heiphetz, Gelman, et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2009). These declines could occur due to social learning. For instance, according to one model, people may learn about social determinants of human characteristics as they get older, and this social experience may lead adults to reason in less essentialist ways than do children (Eidson & Coley, 2014). Relatedly, personal experience may reduce essentialist intuitions. For instance, adopted and donor conceived children—who are not biologically related to all of their parents—are less likely than their traditionally conceived peers to view human characteristics as stemming from a genetic "essence" (Peretz-Lange & Kaebnick, in press).

Of most relevance to a theory of redemption, children also show evidence of essentialism regarding moral characteristics (for a review, see Heiphetz, 2020). Older work supporting this

point has largely tested trait understanding, showing that children in elementary school expect individuals to behave in a morally consistent way (e.g., predicting that a person who behaved morally in the past would continue to perform morally good behaviors in the future; Cain et al., 1997; Heller & Berndt, 1981; Rholes & Ruble, 1984). These findings are consistent with the essentialist notion that morally good behavior stems from a morally good "essence" that will cause additional morally good behavior in the future and with the idea that the propensity to engage in moral behavior is unchanging across time. In another line of work, elementary-schoolers completed a switched-at-birth task in which they learned about a baby who was born to parents with one moral characteristic but raised by parents with a different moral characteristic. Participants predicted that children would share moral qualities with their biological parents rather than the parents who raised them, suggesting that they held the essentialist view that moral characteristics are biologically determined (Heyman & Gelman, 2000). A more recent set of studies asked 5- to 8-year-olds a series of questions directly probing various components of essentialism, such as whether someone who is good now has always been good (measuring the perception that goodness is unchanging) and whether the brain of someone who is good differs from the brain of someone who is bad (measuring the perception that goodness is rooted in biology). This work, too, showed some evidence of essentialism among elementary-schoolers (Heiphetz, 2019).

As in multiple other domains, the propensity to report essentialist views of morality decreases across development. For instance, 6- to 8-year-olds are more likely than adults to perceive moral goodness and badness in essentialist terms (Heiphetz, 2019). Work aligned with this result interviewed 6- to 8-year-olds whose parents were incarcerated or who did not know any incarcerated individuals as well as adults who had no personal experience with the legal

system (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020). Regardless of whether or not their parents were incarcerated, children were more likely than adults to spontaneously reference the immoral "essences" of incarcerated individuals when defining prison; for instance, children commonly described prison as a place where "bad people" go, whereas adults tended to focus on behaviors by defining prison using terms such as "a place for people who have committed a crime." Consistent with these qualitative data, children were also more likely than adults to agree that people go to prison because they are bad people.

In sum, work on essentialism has shown that children are more likely than adults to express the view that multiple characteristics—including immorality—are innate and unchanging. These age-related changes could emerge based on social experience, such as learning about social influences on human characteristics (Eidson & Coley, 2014; Peretz-Lange & Kaebnick, in press; for a review of mechanisms underlying age-related changes in essentialism, see Heiphetz, 2020). This literature therefore leads to the prediction that children should be less likely than adults to expect moral improvement over time. That is, children should be less likely than adults to perceive people as redeemable.

Optimism

Optimism refers to holding positive expectations about future events (e.g., Fischer & Leitenberg, 1986). Given the work discussed above on essentialism, one might expect children to be less optimistic than adults. Because children in preschool and elementary school are more likely than adults to hold an essentialist view of immorality (see Heiphetz, 2020, for a review), they ought to be less likely than older participants to expect people to become better over time. However, the work on optimism suggests that people become *less* optimistic with age. That is,

younger children are *more* likely than older children and adults to expect people to improve in the future.

In one representative study (Diesendruck & Lindenbaum, 2009), 5-year-olds perceived their own and others' positive characteristics (e.g., generosity) as more stable over time than their own and others' negative characteristics (e.g., selfishness). For instance, they reported that a generous person was more likely than a selfish person to still have that trait next year. Other work investigating optimism over a longer developmental window has shown that these positive views decline with age. In one such study (Lockhart et al., 2008), 5- to 6-year-olds in the United States and Japan were more likely than 8- to 10-year-olds and adults to report that negative characteristics would improve with time. In general, younger children demonstrate a positivity bias that declines with age (see also Bamford & Lagattuta, 2019; Umscheid et al., 2023). Scholars have proposed several mechanisms to explain this age-related difference, including adaptive immaturity (positing that optimism is evolutionarily advantageous) and socialization (positing that important adults in children's lives, such as parents and teachers, communicate optimistic messages about the child's capacity to improve; Boseovski, 2010).

Unlike children's optimistic views, adults often exhibit pessimism. Adults can rapidly update impressions of others to become *worse*; for instance, their impressions rapidly become more negative if they learn that someone has been involved with the legal system (Cone et al., 2021). Further, adults require relatively strong evidence to conclude that someone has been redeemed: they need greater evidence of change in order to conclude that someone has been redeemed than to decide that someone has become a morally worse person (Klein & O'Brien, 2016), and they change their impressions of untrustworthy individuals after exposure to very positive but not neutral information (Shen et al., 2020). These effects may arise from a

perception that positive qualities are particularly susceptible to loss, whereas negative qualities are more "sticky" (O'Brien & Klein, 2017). Relatedly, adults see immorality as a "slippery slope," inferring that a person who behaved immorally is likely to continue doing so (Anderson et al., 2024). This pessimism extends to perceptions of society in general, as adults judge that average levels of morality decline over time (Mastroianni & Gilbert, 2023). Thus, adults seem to have a relatively pessimistic view of others' capacity for moral improvement.

Young children's optimism emerges even in domains where they view negative qualities in essentialist terms. For instance, as discussed above, 6- to 8-year-olds are more likely than adults to attribute incarceration to an imprisoned person's badness. However, in a different line of work (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2021), a separate group of 6- to 8-year-olds also viewed incarceration as redemptive. Here, participants learned about a "nice" or "mean" person who went to prison for one year. Children reported that nice people would remain nice and mean people would become nicer after serving their sentence. In contrast, adults reported that mean people would stay mean and even observed that nice people would become meaner, indicating a particularly pessimistic view of what incarceration can do to a person. This age-related difference persisted even when participants learned about potentially redemptive activities that took place during incarceration. For instance, 6- to 8-year-olds were more likely than adults to perceive formerly incarcerated people as capable of moral improvement after taking religious education courses or secular classes related to ethics (Cohen et al., 2023). These differences in optimism extend beyond perceptions of incarcerated people themselves to judgments of their children. In one such study (Dunlea et al., 2022), 5- to 6-year-olds and 7- to 8-year-olds learned about pairs of characters; in each pair, one character had an incarcerated parent, while the other character's parent was not incarcerated. Participants indicated which character held particular

conventional beliefs (e.g., that it is wrong to wear pajamas to school) and moral beliefs (e.g., that it is wrong to hit someone). Younger children responded at chance levels when guessing which character held conventional beliefs, suggesting that they did not view parental incarceration as providing negative information about a peer's ability to learn conventional norms. While 5- to 6-year-olds did express some certainty that the character without, rather than with, incarcerated parents held morally good beliefs, 7- to 8-year-olds expressed even greater certainty in this idea. In other words, with increasing age, children reported less positive views of the moral beliefs of children of incarcerated parents. This finding occurred despite the fact that participants did not learn anything about the moral characteristics or behaviors of the characters themselves; merely knowing that a peer's parent was incarcerated was enough for children—especially 7- to 8-year-olds—to conclude that a peer likely did not know right from wrong.

In sum, research on optimism suggests that preschoolers and children in early elementary school hold relatively positive impressions of others and that the positivity of these impressions decreases across age, perhaps driven by evolutionary forces and/or socialization (e.g., hearing optimistic messages about the self from parents and teachers; Boseovski, 2010). On its own, this body of work makes a different prediction than does work on essentialism regarding age-related patterns in perceptions of redemption. If one reads only work on optimism, one might expect that the youngest participants would most readily grant others' capacity for moral improvement, and that the propensity to see people who have transgressed as redeemable declines with age.

A New Theory of Redemption

Theories on both essentialism and optimism make sense in isolation, and each has garnered empirical support. Yet, no currently existing theory explains how children can believe

both that some people have an unchangingly immoral "essence" *and* that "bad" people can change for the better. A theory of redemption begins to accomplish this task.

Integrating Past Findings

As discussed above, redemption refers to moral improvement, i.e., making right on one's past wrongs and becoming a better person than one was while transgressing. Understood in this way, redemption is a *process*; a person is, at one point, a worse person than how she ends up. Essentialism and optimism clarify different parts of this process, but neither of these frameworks can fully account for a person's entire journey across the moral arc.

Essentialism has a greater focus than does optimism on who a person is right now. Of most relevance to the theory of redemption, an essentialist framework posits that the person who transgressed is currently in possession of an immoral "essence" that arose from a genetic source. Because essences cannot change (according to an essentialist framework), this immoral essence has persisted to the present day and makes the person who transgressed a fundamentally immoral human being. In fact, according to an essentialist perspective, her immorality is a central component of her current identity.

In contrast, optimism has a greater focus than does essentialism on who a person can become in the future. At its core, laypeople's optimism is an answer to the question of what will happen later—tomorrow, next month, next year. An optimistic view highlights a person's capacity to change for the better and supports an expectation for moral improvement.

What remains unclear in the literature to date is how people connect the present and future. That is, how do people account for the entire arc of this journey? While currently existing frameworks speak to one part of people's inferences, the theory of redemption can account for the entire story of how people perceive their fellow humans who have transgressed: who

participants think the transgressor is right now, who the transgressor can become, and what inputs participants think will create change across these time points (e.g., what people think will facilitate moral improvement). In this way, the theory of redemption is fundamentally a developmental theory, as it seeks to explain perceptions of moral change over time (see "Redemption as a Developmental Theory," below).

A theory of redemption can make sense of findings regarding moral cognition that may otherwise appear contradictory. For instance, as described above, adults view criminality in essentialist terms to some extent (Martin et al., 2022; Martin & Heiphetz, 2021); however, children are even more likely than adults to attribute incarceration to internal essences (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020). In this latter work, 6- to 8-year-olds defined prison and jail as places where "bad people" go more frequently than did adults, who typically focused more on behavioral attributions (e.g., defining prison as a place where people went when they did something wrong). These types of explanations can be powerful drivers of the stigma that incarcerated individuals and their family members face from others (Alexander, 2012; Naft & Downey, 2019; Turney & Haskins, 2019; Western, 2018). For instance, children (and adults) report more negative attitudes toward incarcerated individuals when they learn that the incarceration occurred because of internal immorality rather than behaviors or societal inequality (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2022). Further, children do not limit their negative moral evaluations to incarcerated people themselves; rather, they report that children of incarcerated parents are less likely to know right from wrong than their peers whose parents are not incarcerated (Dunlea et al., 2022). In qualitative work, children of incarcerated parents have described the perception that others view them as bad people and their worry that this perception may be accurate (Saunders, 2018).

While these findings indicate that children hold negative moral impressions of people who have had contact with the legal system, a different set of results shows that 6- to 8-year-olds are more likely than adults to report that when people leave prison, they are morally better than they were when they went in (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2022). Children's views stem, in part, from expectations regarding what happens in prison. For instance, children perceive incarcerated people as more redeemable—i.e., more capable of moral improvement—when they spend their time in prison taking classes containing morally relevant content rather than classes that are unrelated to ethics (Cohen et al., 2023). However, in this latter work, children still held a more redemptive view than adults on average; regardless of what happened during a person's time in prison or what kinds of classes they took, children on average were more likely than adults to report that the person would become better after leaving prison. More broadly, children expect punishment (not just incarceration) to change people for the better (Lee & Solomon, in press) and attribute more redemptive punishment motives to others than do adults. For instance, 6- to 7-year-olds are less likely than adults to believe that others inflict punishment with the goal of harming another person (Marshall et al., 2022).

How can children hold both of these views—that people can have immutable, morally bad essences and yet change for the better? A theory of redemption can account for both sets of results. Specifically, this theory suggests that some cues (e.g., current incarceration) cause children to conceptualize people as having an immoral essence that led to the current state of events. However, the current theory also argues that children may simultaneously believe that social experience can fundamentally transform that person so that they are better after the experience than they were before. In a sense, children may be saying that social experiences can fundamentally alter a person's character; for instance, the person who leaves prison may not be

exactly the same person as the one who entered it. Rather, people can transform into different—morally better—human beings. At its core, the theory of redemption posits that children think that social experience can fundamentally alter a person's essential self for the better and, in a sense, change who that person is. In this way, the current conceptualization of redemption is particularly aligned with the idea of change rather than return (Perlin & Fivush, 2021). If children think that some people can have an immoral "essence" from birth and then undergo social experiences that cause them to become a different person, that new person would not be someone who existed before.

Within work on moral essentialism, controversy exists regarding what it means to become a different person. In many studies (e.g., Heiphetz et al., 2018; Heiphetz, Strohminger, et al., 2017; Molouki & Bartels, 2017; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014; Tobia, 2016), participants have reported that changes to moral characteristics can fundamentally alter people. However, it is unlikely that participants mean something like "the better version of this person is no longer obligated to pay the mortgage taken out by their earlier, morally worse self" (Starmans & Bloom, 2018). Rather, when laypeople refer to someone as a different person, they are likely seeking to express the amount and depth of change they believe the person has undergone. When we say that children may conceptualize people as different after a particular social experience than before, we do not mean that children would expect the better version of the person not to be responsible for obligations taken on by their worse version. Rather, we mean that children perceive a profound, deep change to have occurred. This way of conceptualizing redemption is similar to the religious notion of being "born again"—an idea that communicates not that a person has literally passed through the birth canal a second time but rather that they have experienced a radical transformation. When children express the belief that someone can have an

immoral essence but that social experience can turn them into a good person, they may have a similar idea in mind—that the change to moral characteristics is so profound that the person who has undergone that change has, in a way, become a different person with a different essence.

Redemption as a Developmental Theory

Developmental processes are relevant to at least three questions posed by the theory of redemption: (1) How does redemption occur? In other words, in what ways is people's own moral improvement a developmental process? (2) How do people acquire notions of redemption? In other words, what are the developmental inputs to perceptions regarding redemption? (3) How can perceptions of redemption account for currently existing developmental findings? In other words, what are the developmental outputs of perceptions regarding redemption?

How Does Redemption Occur? Under an essentialist theory, redemption should *not* occur; people who endorse an essentialist view of morality would say that some people are born bad and stay that way forever. However, people do change for the better sometimes. How does such change happen?

For centuries, this question has been central to fields outside of psychology, such as philosophy. For instance, Kant (1785/2012) argued that virtue involves overcoming obstacles, such that behaviors are more morally good if they are difficult to do. From this perspective, redemption is a necessary part of morality. In other words, to be a good person, it is important to transgress and to overcome the obstacles that initially stood in the way of behaving rightly. Using a virtue ethics framework, one can conceptualize overcoming obstacles and behaving morally as a skill that one can practice like any other skill. For instance, in his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas described virtue as a habit that one could practice and therefore strengthen. More recent philosophical works have echoed this point (Adams, 2006; Annas, 2011;

Gendler, 2008; Lamb et al., 2021). Thus, one way that people could develop into better humans is to learn what constitutes virtue and then practice behaving virtuously.

Like morality itself, redemption is fundamentally social, and people learn morally better ways of being a person through interactions with others (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009). In some ways, this type of learning functions similarly to other forms of education. Dewey (1964) argued that one purpose of education—including moral education—was to supply the conditions under which learning could occur. Aligning with this perspective, Kohlberg (1975) noted that moral education draws on characteristics that are already present within a person (e.g., an inclination toward empathy, which Kohlberg viewed as universal and present without extensive moral training) and uses a child's developing cognitive capacities to drive a progression through stages of moral reasoning. In this view, the purpose of moral education is not to teach people what to think but rather to expose them to morally better ways of being (e.g., more advanced stages of moral reasoning that could lead to morally better action) in an attempt to instigate moral improvement (see also Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 2015).

These perspectives highlight cognitive components of moral learning. However, morality is not only cognitive. It is primarily relational; we behave morally and immorally toward other people, and it is not possible to be a morally good or bad person in isolation (Cherry, 2021; Gilligan, 1982; Leach & Iyer, 2024; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009). Multiple branches of philosophy (e.g., Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*; Seneca in his *Letters*) have argued that morality is practical. To be a good person, it is not enough to think deep thoughts about ethics; it is imperative to take actionable steps toward achieving the good. The argument here is similar: cognitive learning (learning how to *reason* about morality) is insufficient for redemption to occur; practical learning (learning how to *behave* more morally) is also necessary.

This learning often happens in social contexts and requires social inputs. For instance, interacting with a diverse group of people can lead individuals to develop empathy and/or better understanding for situations that they have not personally experienced and therefore shift their moral approach (Bloom, 2010; Kubin et al., 2021; Zaki, 2019; see also Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). A person who has fought against civil rights for queer people can come to support these rights if they learn that people they love are queer and experience motivation to support these individuals (Gelman & Margalit, 2021). As another example, receiving forgiveness from one's relationship partner can *increase* the likelihood of future transgression (McNulty, 2010), in part because forgiveness is rewarding and people repeat behaviors that have elicited rewards (e.g., Skinner, 1969). However, the likelihood of subsequent transgression decreases if relationship partners express dissatisfaction with the behavior or exert pressure on their significant other to behave differently in the future (McNulty, 2019). Thus, intimate relationships can provide social inputs that guide people away from prior transgressions. In general, looking to moral models (Miller, 2018) or moral exemplars (Han et al., 2022; McAdams, 2013) can provide examples of how others navigate complex moral situations in their own lives and help people improve their own morality.

Laypeople seem to share the view that redemption occurs as a result of learning based on social inputs. For instance, children (and adults, to a weaker extent) report that studying ethics can lead to moral improvement (Cohen et al., 2023). A moral education need not come from formal coursework, as children and adults also believe that social partners (e.g., friends, family members) can help change a person for the better. For instance, 4- and 6-year-olds debate moral claims more in conversations with peers than in conversations with parents, suggesting that they view parents as moral teachers who are sharing "non-negotiable dictums" (Mammen et al., 2019,

p. 2324). In another line of work (Dunlea et al., 2022), 5- to 8-year-olds reported that peers whose parents were incarcerated were less likely than peers with incarcerated parents to know right from wrong. Here, children appeared to reason that non-incarcerated parents would do a better job than incarcerated parents of teaching moral norms to their children. The perception that social partners can shape morality persists into adulthood. For instance, ongoing national conversations have asked how best to redeem racists, with some arguing that the best solution is to engage them in conversation to show them that their views are wrong and others pointing out that social isolation may be a more effective way to indicate the reprehensibility of their views and encourage change (e.g., Ruttenberg, 2022; Saslow, 2018). Although these perspectives take opposite approaches to facilitating moral improvement, they both use social partners as levers for change.

Social inputs can also occur at a structural level. Two of the largest systems that regulate moral behavior—religion and the legal system—shape perceptions of the extent to which people are redeemable. Both children (Heiphetz et al., 2015; Heiphetz & Young, 2019) and adults (Gervais et al., 2017) link religion and morality, perceiving religious individuals (especially those who belong to the dominant religious group in a participant's culture or to the participant's own religious group, if the participant is religiously affiliated) and their behaviors as more moral than religious outgroup members and atheists. Children and adults also perceive religion as a redemptive force in people's lives. For instance, in one study discussed above (Cohen et al., 2023), 6- to 8-year-olds and adults learned about incarcerated individuals who took classes about religion, ethics, or art during their prison sentence. Both children and adults reported that studying religion (as well as secular ethics) would lead to more moral improvement than studying art, with children perceiving religious education as even more redemptive than did

adults. Although evidence about the extent to which religion actually promotes morally good behavior is mixed (Bloom, 2012), laypeople seem to expect religion to make people good.

From a more negative perspective, punishment serves as another social system that people sometimes expect to serve a redemptive function. In fact, ostensibly, rehabilitation is one main goal of incarceration (Allen, 1981; Lynch, 2000; President's Task Force on Prisoner Rehabilitation, 1970). Children's views of punishment align with this goal: Children in elementary school expect that people will change their behavior for the better after receiving punishment outside the carceral system (Bregant et al., 2016; Lee & Solomon, in press), and 6- to 8-year-olds expect that going to prison will make people nicer, although adults did not share this view (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2021). Together, these findings indicate that adults and children expect social inputs (e.g., conversations with parents, religious teachings, punishment) to facilitate redemption, with children typically perceiving inputs as more redemptive than adults. Below, we consider why this age-related difference may emerge.

How Do People Acquire Notions of Redemption? The section above discussed how social inputs may act on people when they are in need of redemption (e.g., how social interactions can facilitate moral improvement). Social inputs have a second role in the theory of redemption—specifically, in shaping how observers respond to people who have transgressed. In other words, social inputs help people develop ideas about redemption and clarify why children and adults hold different views of people's capacity for moral improvement. This focus on social input as a driver of change is consistent with a life transitions model that posits that social experiences at different developmental milestones have cognitive consequences (Higgins & Parsons, 1983; Higgins & Wells, 1986; Ruble, 1994). For instance, becoming a parent (a social change) can shift an individual's attention to cues that previously seemed unimportant (a

cognitive change). Similarly, the theory of redemption argues that social experiences can have cognitive consequences, such as shaping judgments about people's capacity for moral improvement.

As discussed above, children commonly exhibit more optimism than do adults (e.g., Boseovski, 2010), and they have a more redemptive view of who people can become as time goes by—that is, children are more likely than adults to expect that a person who has transgressed can change for the better (Cohen et al., 2023; Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2021). Children may be more likely than adults to believe that people can transform because they have significant experience with undergoing radical change themselves. In many ways, an elementary-schooler is a fundamentally different person from an infant or toddler: a person with different neural circuitry (Callaghan et al., 2019; Werchan & Amso, 2017) who can reason about others' minds (Miller, 2009; Wimmer & Perner, 1983), form and maintain stable friendships (Heshmati et al., 2021; Howe & Leach, 2018), and regulate their emotions more effectively (Al Sager et al., 2019; Morris et al., 2017), among many other changes. Anecdotally, parents sometimes speak of missing younger versions of their children and describe the feeling that those people are gone forever. In this context—one where you remember an earlier version of yourself and are relatively close in time to that version but have become radically different from that past self—it may be easier to imagine how you yourself, and others, can become radically different versions of themselves in the future as well.

In particular, children's own morality shifts drastically within the span of a few years. Longitudinal evidence has shown that from infancy to toddlerhood and the preschool years, children acquire a stronger moral identity—i.e., they begin to place more importance on being a morally good person (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Social experience promotes this shift. For instance,

longitudinal work has shown that responsiveness from caregivers and secure attachment to caregivers facilitates young children's adoption of those caregivers' moral values and promotes children's view that they can come to behave in line with these values even if they failed to do so at a specific present moment (e.g., Kochanska, 2002). During the early elementary school years, children become more relativist in their moral views, coming to see more legitimacy in competing moral claims (Heiphetz & Young, 2017; Wainryb et al., 2004; Wright, 2012). They experience greater alignment between their beliefs about what they *should* do and their actual behaviors (Shaw et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2013), and they show greater curiosity about why other people's behaviors do not always align with moral norms (Yonas & Solomon, in press). When evaluating others' transgressions, they come to place more emphasis on intent rather than attending merely to the harmful outcome of a particular behavior (Cushman et al., 2013; Killen et al., 2011; Zelazo et al., 1996). In general, as children move through the elementary school years, they begin placing significantly greater importance on being a morally good person (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Thus, children have many opportunities to observe that moral characteristics and behaviors can change over time. These social observations may help children learn that redemption is possible.

The moral changes that children experience are predominantly positive. For instance, a longitudinal study showed that responding to others based on their needs increased until the age of around 7 or 8 years, whereas hedonistic responses that prioritized the participants' own desires decreased during this time (Eisenberg et al, 1987). Relatedly, cross-sectional evidence has shown that 3- to 8-year-olds reported that they *should* share with others, but the extent to which children actually shared increased within this developmental window (Smith et al., 2013). Resource distribution also undergoes qualitative changes during preschool and elementary school. For

instance, in one line of work, 3-year-olds were more likely to give resources to a relatively advantaged (e.g., rich, White) peer, whereas 11-year-olds showed a greater propensity to give resources to relatively disadvantaged individuals (Elenbaas et al., in press). To the extent that morality concerns issues of justice and fairness (e.g., Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 2015), the older children in this study were arguably behaving more morally than the younger children, even though participants in both age groups gave away some resources. Thus, children's social experiences do not only teach them that morality, in general, can change. Rather, many experiences teach children that morality will specifically change for the better.

Although early life may be full of experiences that help children form redemptive views, the experiences that people acquire as they get older seem to promote less redemptive perspectives. In contrast to children, who have many experiences of their own moral improvement, adults often have fewer opportunities to experience their morality changing for the better. When describing their goals for themselves, adults often list non-moral pursuits such as reducing their anxiety or increasing their productivity; becoming a better person is not always a priority (Sun & Goodwin, 2020). When adults do seek to change their morally relevant characteristics and behaviors, they experience many failures. People who are addicted to drugs and alcohol harm others in the course of their addiction but often experience difficulty achieving and maintaining sobriety (Dunlop & Tracy, 2013; Singer, 1997). People who are involved in romantic relationships promise to change in the ways that their partner desires and then fall short (Kammrath & Peetz, 2012). Parents work hard to keep their temper but nevertheless find themselves yelling in frustration over and over again (Kennedy, 2022). Adults may observe themselves committing the same transgressions repeatedly despite efforts to change and conclude that moral improvement is unlikely or impossible (for related theorizing, see Bem,

1967). Thus, adults have both numerically more and more recent—and thus likely more salient and memorable (Bjork & Whitten, 1974; Kahneman et al., 1993)—examples reflecting a lack of moral improvement than do children.

The structure of our social world reinforces adults' non-redemptive views. A central task of childhood is learning (e.g., Gopnik, 2020; Tottenham, 2020), and society makes space for children's development. Parents, teachers, and other adults understand moral education to be part of their role (Kaiper-Marquez et al., 2021; Nucci, 2001). Some of this teaching is explicitly redemptive; for instance, when parents and children discuss the children's transgressions, parents call attention to the children's capacity to fix the harm they have inflicted and do better next time (Wainryb & Recchia, 2014). By adulthood, however, people are supposed to be moral experts. Society expects adults to know right from wrong and holds them blameworthy when they do not (e.g., Knobe, 2005; Malle et al., 2022; Pizarro et al., 2003; Siegel et al., 2017). Few, if any, spaces are set up to promote adults' moral growth. Examples of one's own redemption may be easier to come by when one is surrounded by people who are purposefully trying to facilitate moral improvement, who expect some failure, and who set up situations to guide toward success (e.g., design classrooms to promote peer interactions, expecting a need to intervene sometimes to help students treat each other well). Such examples may be harder to acquire when one is spending one's time in environments that are not designed to promote moral growth.

In addition to different experiences of their own transformations or lack thereof, motivated social cognition may play different roles in children's and adults' perceptions of others. Children rely on other people to survive more than adults do and may therefore experience particularly strong motivation to believe that the people around them are morally good agents who can change for the better even if they transgress. Believing that people cannot improve may

leave children vulnerable to the idea that someone who harms them once will continue harming them forever, a proposition that may be potentially damaging to someone who has fewer resources than adults do to remove themselves from injurious situations and meet their own needs.

In contrast, adults' views of redemption may depend more strongly than children's views on a desire to separate from "bad" people. This hypothesis stems from error management theory, which argues that people are motivated to avoid costly errors (e.g., Haselton & Buss, 2009). In this case, mistakenly expecting a "bad" person to change could cause people to put themselves in dangerous and potentially life-ending situations (e.g., interacting with a person who may have harmful intentions). Conversely, mistakenly believing that a "bad" person will remain bad forever is, in some ways, less costly; this error may cost the perceiver a friendship but does not endanger their life or well-being. Avoiding "bad" people out of a desire to protect oneself is not a feasible strategy for children, who rely on others to meet their basic needs. However, as an adult, it is possible to feed, clothe, and shelter oneself while maintaining distance from people whom one has categorized as "bad."

Alongside different experiences of themselves and different motivations to see others as redeemable, children and adults also have different experiences of others' actual behaviors. Because children's morality undergoes significant change, they also have many opportunities to see moral change in their peers. For instance, the fact that 8-year-olds share more than 3-year-olds (Smith et al., 2013) implies that 8-year-olds also experience more pro-social behavior from their peers—perhaps the very same peers who did not treat them pro-socially when they were 3 years old. In contrast, adults' struggles to change—and their lack of desire for moral improvement—implies that they are less likely than children to observe examples of redemption

among their peers. Whereas children's social interactions provide plentiful examples of redemption, adults' social inputs may show them that redemption is rare. By looking both inward, at their own propensity to change, and outward, at examples of others' change, children may develop a relatively redemptive worldview. However, this worldview does not appear to survive the transition to adulthood unscathed.

How Can Perceptions of Redemption Account for Currently Existing Developmental Findings? The section above discussed developmental *inputs* of redemptive ideas. Judgments about redemption also have *outputs* or consequences, and a theory of redemption can increase understanding of some currently-existing findings that may highlight some of these outputs.

As discussed in the section on "Integrating Past Findings," children in preschool and elementary school show relatively high levels of both moral essentialism (Heiphetz, 2019; Heyman & Gelman, 2000) and optimism (Diesendruck & Lindenbaum, 2009; Lockhart et al., 2008), and optimism as well as essentialism regarding morality typically decline with age (Bamford & Lagattuta, 2019; Boseovski, 2010; Heiphetz, 2020). On its face, this conjunction of findings is confusing—if children believe that some people have an immutable "essence" that makes them bad from birth, they should not also believe that people can change for the better. A theory of redemption makes sense of these findings by positing that children believe that people can undergo radical transformations and become, in a sense, entirely different (and morally better) people. In this way, children's notions of redemption align with theological and philosophical accounts describing redemption as a process through which one becomes a different person (e.g., Paul, 2014; Price, 1993).

This framework makes several predictions regarding the consequences of judgments concerning redemption. First, if social experience leads children to perceive people as capable of moral improvement, and if children have relevant social experiences regarding both themselves and others, they should judge that both they themselves and others can change for the better. The extant literature bears out this prediction (e.g., Boseovski, 2010; Cohen et al., 2023; Diesendruck & Lindenbaum, 2009; Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2021). These findings contrast with what would be expected under other theories. For instance, if children are motivated to see themselves as optimally distinct from others (Brewer, 2012), or if they are motivated to resolve discrepancies between their actual and ideal selves (Higgins, 1987), they should see themselves but not necessarily others as redeemable.

Second, children's belief that people can change for the better should have relational consequences. For instance, such a belief may lead children to continue engaging with people who are behaving badly because they expect those people to behave better in the future. Indeed, 7- and 11-year-olds are less likely than 16-year-olds to seek to end a relationship with a peer who has transgressed against them (Wainryb et al., 2020). Additionally, sixth-graders show greater willingness to forgive transgressions and a lower propensity to hold on to resentment than do ninth-graders (Chiaramello et al., 2008). Although this past work did not measure perceptions of redemption directly, such results are consistent with the notion that young children believe that people can change for the better (and respond accordingly, i.e., by continuing to engage in relationship with people who have harmed them), whereas older participants expect people to be more set in their ways.

Third, children who lack social experience with moral improvement should hold a less redemptive view than children who have such experience. Work on childhood abuse offers

evidence in line with this possibility. For instance, preschoolers (Toth et al., 2000) and 8- to 12-year-olds (Shields et al., 2001) who have experienced caregiver maltreatment show less positive representations of their parents and of caregivers in general than do their peers who have not experienced maltreatment. That is, maltreated children may form a fairly stable representation of caregivers as emotionally unresponsive and as engaging in immoral behaviors (e.g., physical coercion as demonstrated by Shields and colleagues [2001]). Further, children often blame themselves for the abuse they receive and are more likely than children who have not experienced maltreatment to form a stable representation of themselves as "bad people" (Dean et al., 1986; Messman-Moore & Coates, 2008; Mojallal et al., 2021). Thus, repeated experiences of abusive behavior can lead children to perceive not just adults but also themselves as irredeemable.

Alternative Models

Thus far, this paper has sketched out a particular view of judgments concerning redemption: that children hold out higher hopes than do adults for people's capacity for moral improvement and that this developmental difference stems from social experience. However, two alternative models may appear to contradict the current theory. Below, we describe these models and note why we think they are less likely than the framework we laid out above.

One alternative possibility is that ideas about redemption depend less than we theorize on children's active learning from social experience and more than we theorize on innate components. Prior scholarship has posited an "innate moral core" (Hamlin, 2013) that is already present during infancy. This theorizing is supported by work showing that infants engage in pro-social behaviors (Dunfield et al., 2011; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006), expect others to behave pro-socially (Sloane et al., 2012; Sommerville et al., 2013), and prefer pro-social over anti-social

actors (Hamlin et al., 2007). If many aspects of moral cognition are innate, perhaps judgments about humans' capacity for moral improvement are, as well.

An innate view of redemption seems unlikely in part because views of redemption show characteristic hallmarks of sensitivity to social input. For instance, children who experience abuse (e.g., who have not observed moral improvement in their caregivers) show less redemptive views than children who have not experienced maltreatment (e.g., Shields et al., 2001; Toth et al., 2000). Additionally, children of incarcerated parents describe incarcerated people in general as internally bad (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020) but report positive evaluations of their own parents (Dunlea et al., 2020), suggesting that personal experiences with individuals may shape responses to their perceived wrongdoing. Further, even the view that people possess an "innate moral core" has not gone uncritiqued. For instance, Tasimi (2020) points out that infant work can reflect social input that babies rapidly learn from their caregivers. This interpretation of the infant work is consistent with the current proposal that views of redemption also reflect social learning.

To be clear, the argument is not that judgments of redemption are entirely independent from any innate process. For instance, the social learning that helps children acquire a concept of redemption may itself be rooted in an innate predisposition to quickly acquire information from other people (Csibra & Gergely, 2009; see also Carey & Spelke, 2010). The argument is only that judgments of redemption *themselves* are not innate, i.e., that children must learn that people are capable of redemption and that, with age and greater social experience, adults learn that others may not be as redeemable as children believe.

Another alternative model to the one this paper proposes is that there is nothing special about redemption and that the processes described here fit within some other theoretical framework. For instance, perhaps redemption is similar to any other topic about which people

learn. Some scholarship suggests that children take in new information more readily than do adults and place more emphasis on exploring their environment; in contrast, adults explore less than do children and are more likely to exploit information that they have already acquired (Jirout et al., 2024; Liquin & Gopnik, 2022). This framework may partially explain why children hold more redemptive views than do adults: perhaps children are exploring the realm of possibilities, including the possibility that people can change for the better, whereas adults are exploiting the negative information they have about people who have transgressed. However, this perspective does not account for the fact that children specifically hold *redemptive* views, as opposed to views that people in general can change. If children were merely exploring all possibilities, they should also judge that people will change for the worse—a pattern that is not reliably evident in existing research (e.g., Bamford & Lagattuta, 2019; Boseovski, 2010; Cohen et al., 2023; Diesendruck & Lindenbaum, 2009; Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2021; Lockhart et al., 2008). Relatedly, past work on explore-exploit trade-offs has asked how individuals think about what *is*, i.e., the world as it currently exists (Abir et al., in press; Cohen et al., 2007; Gopnik, 2020). Building on this perspective, the theory of redemption also probes how children and adults think about what *can be*, i.e., people's capacity to become someone who—in some sense—does not currently exist.

As another example, perhaps what we are calling redemption is merely an instantiation of incrementalism—the idea that human characteristics can change over time (Dweck, 2013). However, several notable differences exist between frameworks centered on incrementalism and the theory of redemption. First, work on incrementalism does not typically focus on developmental questions. This framework has emphasized individual differences in endorsement of incrementalism among children (Erdley & Dweck, 1993; Lee et al., 2019) and adults (Chiu et

al., 1997; Church et al., 2003; Crolic et al., in press) and has typically probed the consequences of incrementalism among each group separately (Blackwell et al., 2007; Paunesku et al., 2015; Rattan & Dweck, 2010; Yeager et al., 2014). Asking how and why ideas regarding incrementalism change between childhood and adulthood has not been a central project of this work.

Second, while incrementalism is a domain general approach to human characteristics, redemption is specifically about morality. People can hold incrementalistic ideas about a wide variety of human characteristics, including characteristics that are not morally relevant (e.g., shyness). Further, incrementalism posits that a characteristic can change but does not specify a direction—a person who views shyness in an incremental way would believe that people can become either more or less shy over time. In contrast, redemption is specifically about moral characteristics and specifies a positive direction of moral change. One cannot have a redemptive view of shyness, nor can one have a redemptive view that expects moral characteristics to change for the worse. Redemption is thus more specific than incrementalism.

This greater specificity does not make redemption a particular instantiation of a more general incrementalist view. Rather, moral characteristics are qualitatively distinct from non-moral characteristics. For instance, both children and adults perceive moral characteristics as a particularly central component of identity and report that changes to moral characteristics would fundamentally alter who a person is overall to a greater extent than changes to non-moral characteristics such as personal preferences and psychological traits (Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Goodwin, 2015; Heiphetz, Strohminger, et al., 2017; Heiphetz et al., 2018; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014). Thus, laypeople's ideas about redemption concern who someone is as a person and how they can become, in a sense, a different person. As discussed above, these are ideas

about how a person's essence can change. Although work on incrementalism has included moral characteristics—for instance, probing the consequences of believing that moral characteristics can change over time (Dweck et al., 1995; Miller et al., 2007)—the current framework argues that there is a difference between expecting people to change for the better and expecting other types of personality change. Incrementalism refers to ideas about whether *particular features* of a person can change over time. Redemption is the idea that *a person themselves* can change into a different person.

Consequently, the inputs and outputs of a general incrementalist view differ from the inputs and outputs of views concerning redemption. For instance, children learn many new skills and yet sometimes hold entity views of intelligence, reporting that some people are born smart and others are not and that this characteristic cannot change (Dweck, 2013). Relatedly, among college students taking a math class, the idea that abilities were unchanging *increased* over the course of the semester; that is, greater experience learning math predicted a *lowered* view that change could occur (Shiveley & Ryan, 2012). Similarly, children can observe that their own shyness changes across time (Lawson et al., 2023; Poole et al., 2020) and yet nevertheless perceive that shyness is immutable (Zhang & Xu, 2019). In other words, children can have social inputs suggesting that non-moral characteristics can change and nevertheless perceive those characteristics as unchanging. These results highlight an important distinction between the theory of redemption, which posits that redemptive judgments emerge as a result of experiences with one's own and others' moral improvements, and incrementalist views more broadly, which do not appear sensitive to the same types of social experiences.

Future Directions in the Study of Redemption

Above, we have described how a theory of redemption integrates previously existing theories, explains how children acquire the notion that people can change for the better, and accounts for age-related changes in redemptive ideas. Future work can tackle multiple questions that arise from this framework.

First, future research can further probe the mechanisms underlying the development of ideas concerning redemption. The current theory posits that children acquire redemptive views from social experience and that experiences acquired over the course of development, such as repeated exposures to others' unchanging transgressions, lead adults to have a less redemptive view than children. To date, most of the evidence supporting this view comes from cross-sectional comparisons of participants at different developmental points. Future work could incorporate longitudinal designs to assess within-person changes across time.

Some initial evidence for theorizing regarding the role of social experience in judgments concerning redemption comes from individuals who have experienced early childhood adversity. For instance, children who have experienced repeated exposure to caregivers' transgressions have relatively negative expectations of caregivers' future behaviors (Shields et al., 2001; Toth et al., 2000). However, children of incarcerated parents—who, in some cases, may be relatively shielded from the behaviors that led to their parent's incarceration and who have had some positive experiences with their parents prior to and during their incarceration (Genty, 2003; Kremer et al., 2021; Turney & Marin, 2022)—do not see their own parents as irredeemably bad people (Dunlea et al., 2020). Future longitudinal work can examine developmental influences over a longer period of time, such as asking how experiencing the incarceration of a parent during early childhood shapes moral cognition in adulthood. Future work can also investigate how social learning shapes redemptive views among individuals who have not experienced

adversity. For instance, perhaps leading participants to transgress in a laboratory setting (e.g., by cheating on a task or telling a small lie, Rai & Holyoak, 2013; Talwar & Lee, 2008) and then facilitating their pro-social behaviors (e.g., providing a manipulation to increase honesty) increases their views that people can change for the better. Such a manipulation may be especially powerful among adults, whom we expect will hold less redemptive views than children at baseline.

Second, in addition to shaping *developmental* factors that inform redemptive views, future studies can investigate *socio-cognitive* factors within particular developmental windows that affect participants' judgments about moral change. For instance, in the prior work described above, punishment appeared to signal that punished individuals are immoral and potentially irredeemable, particularly to older participants. One relevant line of work showed that while 6- to 8-year-olds describe incarcerated people as "bad" (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020), they also report that prison will make these people morally better—in contrast to adults, who expect punishment to make people morally worse or to have no effect on moral qualities (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2021). Yet, as discussed in the opening to this paper, perceiving people as redeemable is fundamental to humans' ability to live together. If people believed that someone who has committed a moral wrong could not change for the better, it would be difficult to maintain relationships with people who have transgressed; because everyone transgresses, redemption is needed for continued co-existence with others. Thus, a fruitful direction for future work is to investigate factors that increase perceptions of redeemability, particularly among adults.

Drawing on the theory of expressive punishment (Bilz, 2016; Cushman et al., 2019; Feinberg, 1965; Kleinfeld, 2016), future work can test whether different forms of punishment send different messages about the redeemability of individuals who have done something wrong.

Expressivism holds that punishment communicates information to observers. For instance, punishment could inform transgressors (Sarin et al., 2021) and observers (Bregant et al., 2016) about social norms; punishing people for stealing sends a message that stealing is not socially acceptable. As discussed here, punishment can also communicate that the person receiving the punishment is a bad, potentially irredeemable person (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020; Martin & Heiphetz, 2021; Martin et al., 2022). Perhaps one reason that this result has emerged is that the types of punishment studied in prior work on this topic have targeted the people who transgressed, seeking to harm them without taking steps to ameliorate the negative consequences of their actions. In cases where punishment targets transgressors, it may communicate that those transgressors are bad. However, it is also possible to punish with the goal of restoring the world as much as possible to its pre-offense state. Such punishment targets behaviors rather than individuals and may communicate that the behaviors, rather than the people who performed those behaviors, are bad. For instance, a person who steals could be required to return the money they took, plus interest, to their victim. This punishment imposes a negative consequence on the transgressor (returning more money than they took) while also making the victim whole. To the extent possible, that punishment has wiped away the consequences of the transgression, because at the end of the punishment the victim has their money back. Because these types of punishments focus on the behavior that occurred, they could communicate that the behavior is bad without communicating that the person who performed the behavior is bad or irredeemable. In fact, such action-oriented punishments can send the opposite message—that the transgressor is capable of making their past wrongs right and becoming a better person. Future work can test this possibility and, more broadly, probe children's and adults' views of punishment as communicative.

Third, future work can investigate when and why people readily grant redemption. One fruitful avenue to pursue along these lines is to integrate moral psychology with work on intergroup relations. These areas of study are conceptually linked: if one perceives prejudice and discrimination as immoral, as many people do (e.g., Effron et al., 2012; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Siena College Research Institute, 2021), then knowledge about morality should inform scientific understanding of bias and vice versa. However, at the present moment, these two fields of study remain largely separate (for exceptions, see Leach et al., 2015; Mosley & Heiphetz, 2021; Rutland et al., 2010). Creating stronger bridges between work in moral psychology and research on intergroup bias is especially important when trying to understand people's propensity (or lack thereof) to grant redemption because group membership shapes perceptions of wrongdoing. Individuals stereotype people as immoral based on their group membership (Avery et al., 2021; Gervais et al., 2017), perceive identical behaviors as having different moral valence when performed by outgroup rather than ingroup members (Heiphetz et al., 2015), punish the transgressions of outgroup members and minoritized individuals more harshly than the transgressions of ingroup members and individuals who belong to dominant groups (Kahn et al., 2016; Yudkin et al., 2016), and judge that the more frequently ingroup members—but not outgroup members—perform a particular behavior, the more moral that behavior is (Goldring & Heiphetz, 2020). Therefore, while people may be especially *un*likely to perceive outgroup members as redeemed, they may also judge that ingroup members are quite capable of moral improvement. Such judgments may depend in part on people's motivation to see ingroup members both as morally good (Ellemers & Van der Toorn, 2015; Leach et al., 2015) and as distinct from outgroup members (Brewer, 2012; Turner et al., 1979).

In addition to a different ultimate judgment (whether or not people can become better), group membership could also shape the mechanism underlying these judgments. Legal scholarship and work in moral philosophy has argued that moral judgments *should* depend in part on intent and that society should grant greater leniency to accidental rather than purposeful transgressions (Fletcher, 1998; Green, 1998; Gert, 1998; Hart, 1968/2008; Mikhail, 2007). Supporting this perspective, work in moral psychology indicates that neurotypical adults *actually do* base moral judgments partially on intent, delivering harsher moral judgments against people who meant to transgress than against people who performed an identical behavior accidentally (Ames & Fiske, 2013; Carlson et al., 2022; Moran et al., 2011; Payir & Heiphetz, 2022; Young & Saxe, 2008). In many instances, these judgments make sense; for instance, it is reasonable to punish manslaughter less harshly than murder. However, in intergroup contexts, dominant group members sometimes emphasize their innocent intentions at the expense of addressing the harms they and their group have inflicted on non-dominant groups. For instance, when accused of sexual harassment, former governor of New York Andrew Cuomo stated that he was "trying to help" and described his behavior as "meant to convey warmth, nothing more" (NBC New York, 2021). As another example, Amy Cooper (a White woman) lied to the police by stating that Christian Cooper (a Black man) was endangering her and then stated that she "did not mean to harm that man in any way" (Aguilera, 2020). Neither Cuomo nor Cooper went on to effectively address the harms they committed, and they arguably faced relatively lenient punishment for their behaviors (e.g., the criminal charges against Cuomo were dropped). In such cases, perhaps dominant group members are granting redemption too readily and ignoring the lasting harms that they and their ingroup members commit. Future work can test these ideas by investigating when and why people perceive others as capable of moral improvement and what factors increase

perceptions of redeemability. For instance, perhaps a motivation to view one's own group positively (Brewer, 2012; Turner et al., 1979) leads individuals to grant redemption more readily to ingroup, versus outgroup, members. More broadly, future work can create stronger connections between moral psychology and intergroup bias to clarify the moral underpinnings of prejudice and discrimination.

Conclusions

Redemptive narratives are a common way for people to understand their own lives and the lives of others (e.g., McAdams, 2013). However, psychological science does not yet have a well-developed theory of redemption. In fact, two prominent developmental frameworks—work on essentialism and on optimism—make contradictory predictions about how people's understanding of others' moral character may change across development. This paper proposes a novel theory of redemption that brings both of these frameworks into conversation with each other and explains how findings supporting both of these frameworks can co-exist. This theory concerns an inherently developmental process (moral change over time) and centers developmental questions, such as how people acquire ideas about redemption and how these ideas change with age. This theory can also spark a number of future studies, including research further investigating the developmental and socio-cognitive factors that shape people's understanding of redemption. A comprehensive understanding of redemption and its socio-cognitive underpinnings is crucial for making sense of apparently contradictory theoretical frameworks within developmental science and for understanding how people can live together in society with individuals who have caused harm.

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