Response to Bebeau, Thoma and Cunningham

I welcome the opportunity to respond to Bebeau, Thoma and Cunningham’s critique of my article, “The Case for the Four Component Model vs. Moral Foundations Theory: A Perspective from Moral Psychology.” Although readers of the critique alone might miss the main point of my piece—that I found the Four Component Model (FCM) to be an ideal model for professional identity formation—a careful reading of the article itself would reveal not only that our positions are much closer than their critique would suggest, but also that much of the critique appears to result from a fundamental misunderstanding of my call to integrate a fuller picture of the field of moral psychology into professional education.

It appears that Bebeau et al. worried that legal educators might assume I was arguing for an integrated curriculum based on both the Four Component Model and Jonathan Haidt’s Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), but nothing could be further from the truth. When I wrote that it is crucial to integrate an understanding of some of the ideas about intuitive responses central to both Haidt’s and Kahneman’s theories as well as to Bandura’s ideas about moral disengagement (see below), I was not in any way suggesting a curriculum in which the assignments and assessment somehow integrated portions of both the FCM and MFT. Rather, I argue for the complete appropriateness of a FCM based curriculum but with, at minimum, an introduction to additional concepts that are part of the big discussions in psychology in general and moral psychology in particular. What Bebeau et al. may have heard was a suggestion for a blended model and that would indeed be a “futile and misleading endeavor for legal educators.” In short, we are in absolute agreement that MFT would be a dismal failure as a “theoretical model for
designing and assessing a law school professional ethics curriculum.” As I wrote:

But the second part of this Article’s argument proposed that we would do students a real disservice if we do not also help them to understand both the evolutionarily pre-attuned propensity to make rapid, intuitive evaluations heavily influenced by cultural norms described by Haidt and colleagues and our dark and dangerous capacity for moral disengagement described by Bandura. Ideally then, legal ethics courses would not only provide knowledge and practice in formal ethical guidelines but also a rich immersion in the theories and applications of moral development.

Given my goal of providing a brief overview of the current state of the field, I did more exposition of intuitive theories of morality than extensive critique; consequently I appreciate Bebeau et al. pointing out the Journal of Moral Education’s special issue that provides many thoughtful analyses of both strengths and challenges to Haidt’s ideas and research. Like the authors, I also strongly reject Haidt’s blanket “intuitions come first” assumption but perhaps give more weight than they do to the importance of realizing that all too often all of us fall into using the fast System 1 thinking described by Daniel Kahneman. My own students have found it extremely helpful to become aware of our human propensity for “thinking fast” and have used that knowledge to approach moral issues with much more thoughtfulness. As I point out in my article, we would do a very poor job indeed as educators if we did not nurture our students’ capacity for the slower and reflective processing Kahneman calls System 2. In the passage from my article below, I note that I concur with Hamilton and Monson’s appraisal that one of the real strengths of
the FCM is that, although it acknowledges the role of moral intuitions, its goal remains the cultivation of the complex moral reasoning necessary for ethical professional practice.

Thus, a major limitation of MFT for professional ethical formation centers on the fact that it does a fine job describing System 1 thinking, but fails to acknowledge that education and maturity, as well as the demands of professional ethics, call for the cultivation of System 2 reasoning. In contrast, Hamilton and Monson argue that although the Four Component Model can encompass moral intuitions, its thrust remains in “developing capacities to make sense of complex moral situations.”

In summary, rather than going into a point by point rebuttal of other specific criticisms with which I respectfully disagree, I prefer to end by stating that after carefully reviewing both my article and the critique put forward by Professors Bebeau, Thoma and Cunningham, I stand by the analyses in my piece and look forward to opportunities to engage in further conversations about our respective perspectives.

Elizabeth C. Vozzola, 16 May 2017