The Role of Consumption Culture in Children’s Moral Development:
The Case of David Beckham

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Abstract
The ethics of marketing to children is a hotly debated subject which tends to focus on children’s progressive cognitive ability to understand either the persuasive intent of commercial advertising or the symbolism inherent in brands. The role which consumption culture in general plays in the moral development of children has received less attention. This paper considers how the commercial world contributes to the construction of role models and cultural icons, and the ways in which children might draw on such constructions in developing their own moral discourse(s). Just as a cognitive development approach to understanding how children relate to advertising and brand symbolism is limited, so too are philosophical approaches narrowly equating moral development with cognitive development. We draw on perspectives which consider the social and cultural context of moral evolution to frame a qualitative study of children’s relationships with brands, in the widest sense of the word. We focus on the part played by celebrity soccer player David Beckham in providing children with a means of debating and negotiating the moral ambiguities and complexities of contemporary consumer culture. Our findings show celebrities can provide ‘socio-cultural tools’ with which children can participate in nuanced and meaningful moral debate; and point to the moral responsibility of adults as direct and indirect shapers of the wide range of commercial influences and hegemonic discourses with which children are presented in specific socio-cultural contexts.

Key words
Celebrity, children, commercial influences, consumption culture, moral development, moral discourse, moral education
Introduction
It is widely acknowledged that children of today are exposed to commercial influences in unprecedented ways, both in Europe (Verrept and Gardiner, 2000; Mayo, 2005) and North America (Kaiser Foundation, 1999; Schor, 2004; Moore, 2004). The children’s market in the UK alone is estimated at £3bn for purchases made with children’s own money and £30bn when child-influenced purchases are included (ChildWise, 2005). According to ChildWise (2006), 70% of 5-16-year-olds in the UK have internet access at home, with users spending an average of 1.8 hours a day online, while two-thirds of this age group also own a mobile phone. Additionally, children spend an average of 2.5 hours per day watching television. Through these various means – TV, internet, SMS, video, magazines and radio – children have become the recipients of targeted marketing messages relayed direct to their bedrooms.

Despite the amplification of such trends, our understanding of how children negotiate this intense world of brands symbols and commercial influences remains limited (Nairn and Griffin, 2007). In particular, scant attention has been paid to the ways in which children engage with questions of ethics and morality as an inherent part of their engagement with objects and acts of consumption. Yet, developing a richer understanding of the processes by which children engage with value judgments has important implications for parents, teachers, policy makers, and marketing researchers and practitioners.

The effects of marketing to children have been the focus of such recent publications as Sue Palmer’s (2006) Toxic Childhood, the Compass Report (2006) entitled The Commercialisation of Childhood, and Juliet Schor’s bestseller (2004) Born to Buy. While these publications have highlighted some of the ethical implications of marketing to children, the popular debate has yet to be expanded to include an exploration of what moral development of children in a contemporary, increasingly commercialised context means.

Our paper is organised as follows. First we highlight the dominance of the cognitive development paradigm in framing recent thinking in the moral development of children. Next we present literature which critiques and reframes this approach. From here we present the design and analysis of a qualitative study with 150 children. We focus on the role played by celebrity soccer player David Beckham in providing a means for children to debate and negotiate the moral ambiguities and complexities on modern consumer culture. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of the results for both understanding children’s moral development in a consumption culture and the role of adults as direct and indirect shapers of the influences presented to children.

Theories of Moral Reasoning
Until recently, the received view of the moral development of the child rested on a general acceptance of Jean Piaget’s (1960) age-stage model of childhood cognitive and social development, sometimes termed ‘developmentalism’. In developmentalism, the child’s mental and interactive capacities evolve in a linear fashion through a set of biologically predetermined stages: ‘sensorimotor’ age 0 -2; ‘pre-operational’ age 2-7; ‘concrete operational’ age 7-11; and ‘formal operational’ age 11 onwards.
We argue that over-reliance on the so-called developmentalist approach is unhelpful for a number of reasons. Firstly, such an approach focuses almost exclusively on biological age, thus privileging nature over nurture in what it means to be a child, and overlooking other non-age related factors, such as gender, ethnicity, cultural context and social class. Furthermore, the developmentalist approach adopts a predominantly cognitive perspective, and largely under-plays the social dynamics of interpretation, peer-group interaction and emotion. Finally, the cognitive psychology approach seems to suggest that what it means to be a child is both timeless and universal, and does not take into account changes in the socio-cultural context in which children exist.

Kohlberg (1958, 1976, 1981) has been an influential proponent of the developmental approach to moral reasoning. He argues that the capacity for moral reasoning develops through a number of identifiable developmental stages (McDonough, 2005), including the pre-conventional (prevalent in most children under 9, some adolescents, and many adolescent and adult criminal offenders), the conventional (demonstrated by most adolescents and adults “in our society and other societies” [1976:33]), and the post-conventional (reached by a minority of adults, and usually only over the age of 20). These stages roughly correspond to the stages of cognitive development identified by Piaget. Significantly, Kohlberg (1976:32) claims that:

Since moral reasoning clearly is reasoning, advanced moral reasoning depends upon advanced logical reasoning. There is a parallelism between an individual’s logical stage and his moral stage.

Kohlberg (1976) maintains that the highest level of moral development occurs when adults use their capacity for abstract reasoning to make decisions based on universal ethical principles (or clusters of principles), such as those related to justice. Persons at the post-conventional stage of Kohlberg’s model recognise that an individual’s own values may diverge substantially from those prescribed by society, and that this can give rise to ethical dilemmas which escape straightforward resolution. The individual is able to navigate such dilemmas through “the belief as a rational person in the validity of universal moral principles” (Kohlberg, 1976:35), which may at times be at odds with societal convictions, but which are always morally superior.

That generalisable and abstractive/prescriptive moral judgments are considered to be the ‘hallmark of morality’ (Lourenço, 2003:44) is both implicit and explicit in the work of many other moral theorists (see Colby et al., 1987; Turiel, 1983; Turiel et al., 1987) and, indeed, is backed by a long tradition of moral philosophy, from Plato to Kant (Haynes, 1998).

However, a number of recent thinkers have challenged this paradigm notably Gilligan (1982), Hekman (1995), and Tappan (1991, 2006). Hekman (1995) recognises that discourses which relegate morality to the realm of abstract principles (more often than not centring around values of ‘justice’) are hegemonic in many Western societies, and responsible for silencing not only the ‘different’ moral voice (Gilligan, 1995) but also the ways in which we think and talk about morality, and our understanding of ourselves as moral persons engaged in moral discourse and moral action in the messy contexts of our everyday lives. As our interest is to consider children’s evolving
understanding of the moral ambiguities and complexities of modern consumer culture, the thinking of these challengers provides a particularly useful framework. We present some of the key arguments below.

Carol Gilligan (1982), in her now widely-acclaimed framework of an ethic of care questions a number of Kohlberg’s interpretations. She argues that whilst Kohlberg’s assumes that justice, and associated values, such as respect, fairness, liberty, are the highest principles to which we might aspire, and that their nature is universal and timeless, decisions about ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ can also be based on how these may affect relationships with others, or on an ethic of care rather than justice. Comparing Kohlberg with Gilligan, Jorgensen (2006) has recently pointed out that Kohlberg’s theory presupposes a ‘formalist’ position, whereby it is the form of reasoning that people adopt, rather than the content with which they engage or the conclusions reached, which determines their stage of development. He notes that Gilligan’s stages of development are less structural and universal and more sensitive to context and content. Jorgensen (2006:189) makes the following distinction:

Gilligan is mostly concerned with relationships, with resonance, letting people be heard for who they are, listening for moral language in dilemmas that were embedded in their real lives. In other words, she avoids the level of abstraction necessary for description of the hard and simple stages as Kohlberg tries to do.

For Gilligan, transition from one stage to the next occurs not as a result of step changes in cognitive ability, but as moves towards a ‘relational’ understanding of self: from an ego-centric focus, to a focus on others at the expense of oneself, to an appreciation of the importance of both self and others. Such shifts in understanding are not solely determined by one’s cognitive maturity, but emerge from an individual’s particular socio-historical context, life experiences, and complex networks of meaningful relationships. As will be shown later in this paper, our study supports this perspective, and suggests that children’s experience of an increasingly commercialised world, and their active participation in common discourses around commodification, meaningfully contributes to their moral unfolding by making space for engaged sense-making and for the holding of ambiguity.

In support of Gilligan, Hekman (1995) argues that the perspectives on moral theory which have dominated since the Enlightenment are both severely limited and limiting. Specifically, she challenges the notion of the autonomous and disembodied subject of modernist philosophy, and furthermore deconstructs the notion (expounded by Kohlberg [1976], amongst others) that action is moral to the extent that it is brought about by rational consideration of abstract universal principles.

Hekman (1995:163) points the way to understandings of morality which appreciate its embodied, contextualised, pluralistic and ongoingly negotiated nature: “Moral voices are connected to moral persons, persons who are concrete rather than disembodied. To have a moral voice is to participate in a common discourse, to embrace a form of life...It is, quite simply, what we do”. We argue that discourses around consumption, marketing and commodification form part of the broader common discourses upon which we draw as human beings in industrialised societies. Moral choices and moral voices, or assumptions and interpretations around ‘right-ness’ and ‘wrong-ness’ and
around what constitutes ‘a good life’ and how we might pursue it, are necessarily embedded and (re)constructed within such discourses.

Like Gilligan and Hekman, Tappan poses a significant challenge to narrow definitions of moral functioning as ‘thinking and reasoning’ about abstract principles (Tappan, 2006:9), and instead conceptualises morality and moral development in ways which recognise the place of the concrete human person, situated in a specific time and place and connected to other thinking-feeling persons in complex processes of meaning-making. Tappan argues that we give form and substance to our moral voices (and to our moral action) through the use and mastery of ‘socio-cultural tools’. These tools, or ‘moral mediational means’ include words, language and forms of discourse which originate, and are often hegemonic, in one’s particular socio-historical context. According to Tappan, then, moral functioning could be understood as mediated action. He contends that:

Moral development…must be seen as the outcome of a complex developmental process that includes both maturational influences and the experience of social communication and interaction between speaking persons, engaged in ongoing dialogue with others – dialogue that occurs in specific social, cultural, historical contexts... (Tappan, 2006:14)

The thinking of Gilligan, Hekman and Tappan form the conceptual framework for our empirical work to which we now turn.

**Empirical Research**

In undertaking our study, we found it useful to hold the following questions: What happens if, following Gilligan (1982), Hekman (1995) and Tappan (2006), we deconstruct the notions of a disembodied moral knower and abstract moral knowledge? What if, like them, we are able to “[hear] moral voices speaking from the lives of connected, situated selves” (Hekman, 1995:30)? Can we expand our definitions of morality and moral knowledge so that these include the contextual, relational, co-constructed knowledge that is “a product of discourses that constitute forms of life” (Hekman, 1995:30)? Our research thus sought to explore some of the ways in which children’s engagement with an intensified commercial world contributed to and impacted on their unfolding moral discourses.

**Method**

Methodological decisions were taken with the following overarching purpose in mind: we wished to discover how children themselves adopt, adapt and assign meanings to consumption objects and commercial influences. Specifically, in line with our intention to capture a child’s view rather than an adult’s view, we wanted to ensure that the consumption objects included in our study were those which children saw as meaningful to them. This is an important departure from previous studies on children’s consumer socialisation, where the subject matter for discussion is suggested by adults (Belk et al., 1982, 1984). Secondly, our aim was to move away from conventional Piagetian-centred approaches which emphasise cognitive development as a key factor determining how children relate to consumption. Arguably, such approaches focus on ascertaining the extent to which children of different ages can ‘correctly’ interpret the adult world, as if adult understandings are
the ‘ideal’ or objective standard by which human behaviour should be understood.
Instead, our focus was on the nature of the discourses and processes through which
children collectively responded to the consumption objects which they identified as
particularly relevant and/or interesting.

With permission from schools, parents and the children themselves, we held 30
minute brainstorming sessions with a total of 72 children (12 groups of 6 children),
drawn in equal numbers from two different schools from a small city in the UK. We
chose one private and one state school in order to recruit children from a range of
social and economic backgrounds. In each school half of the groups were from Year
3 (age 7/8) and half from Year 6 (age 10/11); a third of the groups were girls only; a
third boys only and a third mixed gender. This gave us a range of social settings in
which significant children’s brands could be identified.

Each brainstorming session was activated by the question “what things are kids in
your class into at the moment?” Ideas were captured on a flip chart with lists of brand
names generated for generic product suggestions. Discussion proceeded by creating
lists of liked and hated brands. Creating this polarity allowed space for meanings to
emerge and debate to be stimulated. Our dataset consisted of the flip charts of “things
kids are into”, the classified lists of brands and 170 single-spaced A4 pages of
verbatim transcriptions of the children’s discussions. Two researchers independently
analysed the scripts, lists and flip charts and together selected the 14 brands
mentioned most consistently across groups and which generated most excitement,
interest and debate. These were used as the stimuli for the second part of the study
(see table 1). The brand list notably included a range of sports stars, pop stars and
TV shows as the children clearly regarded these as symbolic commodities in the same
way as toys and games. Preliminary insights from the brainstorming were used to
inform the design of the second part of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: The 14 brands selected for discussion in stage 2</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Busted</strong></td>
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<td><strong>McFly</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Britney Spears</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>David Beckham</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Simpsons</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Barbie</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Bratz</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Action Man</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Beyblades</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Playstation, X-Box, Game Cube</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pokemon</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yu-Gi-Oh</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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Research Design – Stage 2

Stage 2 took place 6 months after stage 1 in the same school year, in the same two schools, involving the same two age groups. We recruited different children to participate in stage 2, owing to logistical impossibility of contacting the same children without compromising the anonymity of the participants. Of course, the children participating in stage 2 might have generated a somewhat different set of branded objects from the stage 1 participants, but their generally enthusiastic involvement in the stage 2 discussions implied that this was not the case.

We drew our methodology from within the existential-phenomenology paradigm as applied to consumer research by Thompson et al. (1989). Drawing on the work of Giorgi (1983), Thompson et al. (1989:133) propose that blending existential philosophy and phenomenological methodology results in a “contextually based, holistic psychology that views human beings in non-dualistic terms and seeks to attain a first-person description of experience.” This seemed to capture perfectly our endeavour to understand children’s negotiations from their point of view rather than our own point of view (i.e. that of an adult).

Our data collection methodology for stage 2 was thus a form of phenomenological interview which Thompson et al. (1989:138) describe as “perhaps the most powerful means for attaining an in-depth understanding of another person’s experience”. In line with suggestions for this sort of research by Kvale (1983) it was important for the children as interview subjects to feel empowered to share their experiences, particularly as they were in a school setting where adults are usually in control. The researcher selected as discussion group moderator was an outgoing, fashionable woman in her early 20s who had a very friendly manner and good empathy with children. During the interviews she sat in a circle with the children: in one school on cushions on the floor. It was made clear from the outset of the discussions that brands for discussion had been suggested by other children, not by adults and there were no right or wrong answers: just a real interest in their own views. A total of 56 children (16 groups of 3 or 4 children) took part in the discussions. The phenomenological interview or discussion aims to capture a first-person experience. Thus apart from the opening question, the course of the discussion is set by the respondents (Thompson et al., 1989, pg. 139). Thus the researcher simply presented each group with a picture of each of the 14 brands in turn and asked “what do you think of …?” The ensuing exchanges between the children formed the first half of the discussion agenda. The second half involved a group sorting task. It had become clear from the stage 1 discussions that the favourability of a brand (whether or not it was “cool”) was a highly contested terrain. In stage 2 the children were given small pictures of the 14 brands and asked, as a group, to place the pictures on a cork board labeled “cool” on one side and “not cool” on the other. This task allowed us to observe the process by which a group of peers negotiated the meaning of the consumption objects that form a part of their everyday lives. The task elicited heated debate, high levels of involvement and rich discussion. With parental, school and children’s permission we videoed stage 2 discussions in order to provide a fuller picture of the social interactions involved in the cork board sorting task.
Whilst the principles of the phenomenological interview have typically been applied in a one-to-one context, we felt that it was crucial to understand the group processes by which children interact with the commercial world. Since Judith Rich Harris’s landmark article in Psychological Review (1995) and subsequent book, “The Nurture Assumption” (1998) there has been increasing recognition of the seminal part which the peer group plays in children’s adaption to their social environment. Group processes can, of course, become dominated by forceful characters whose views color collective opinion. We used a number of methods to avoid this. First, the group size was very small (3 or 4 children) which made it less intimidating even for the very shy to voice an opinion; second, group members were drawn from the same class (of around 20 children) which meant they were already comfortable with each other; third, in the sorting task the researcher ensured that the pictures were handed out to the children in turn which meant that each child had equal access to the power afforded by physically holding an object. Fourth, during general discussion the researcher ensured that all children were given the opportunity to contribute. Analysis of the body language in the videos and a word count of the contribution made by each child convinced us that none of the groups had been hijacked by a dominant child. Moreover, as we conducted 16 groups (a large number for most qualitative research purposes) the effects of one or two dominant individuals in the whole text was minimized.

Our dataset consisted of 390 double spaced A4 pages of verbatim discussion transcript; over 8 hours of video footage and 16 still photos of the final positions of the brand pictures on the cork boards. The researcher’s contribution to the discussion was less than 5% (about 10 double spaced pages out of 390) and consisted mainly of instructions for the cork board exercise and the introduction of each picture or invitations to particular children to contribute. We thus felt we had achieved the goals of the phenomenological interview process in a group setting: attaining children’s own views of their experience of brands.

Analysis
Three researchers separately conducted a qualitative thematic discourse analysis of the 390 pages of transcript, using video footage for clarification of tone of voice or placement of pictures on the board. In line with our interpretive framework, we used an emic approach where the interpretation in the first instance relies on the respondents own terms and category systems rather than the researchers’ (Kvale, 1983 in Thompson et al., 1989). The researchers met in order to challenge each other’s reading of the text in an attempt to minimise interpretations not strictly emic in nature. We asked ourselves and each other – is that what the children are saying or what we think they are saying? The next stage of analysis was the hermeneutic circle (Bleicher, 1980) which involves an iterative, part-to-whole reading strategy by which researchers develop a holistic understanding of each individual group discussion transcript, while noting similarities and differences across age groups, gender and schools.

Background on Beckham
In our analysis of the children’s discourses we concentrate on the discussions related to David Beckham who was amongst the iconic influences most consistently identified and provided particularly rich material for discussion amongst the children.
Before discussing our findings it will be helpful to establish some details of this UK celebrity.

An English soccer player, David Beckham has achieved fame and recognition worldwide both on and off the pitch. From 1995 to 2002, Beckham played for Manchester United, one of the most successful clubs in England. In 2002, he transferred to the Spanish club Real Madrid. In January 2007, Beckham announced that he had signed a new multi-million dollar contract with the US soccer team LA Galaxy, which he is due to join at the end of the present season. Beckham captained the English national team from November 2000 until the end of England’s campaign in the 2006 World Cup. He became a house-hold name both in the UK and abroad not only because of his performance as a mid-fielder and his famous ‘crosses’ and ‘free kicks’, but also because of his relationship with wife Victoria, formerly a member of the pop music girl-band ‘Spice Girls’. The couple—commonly known as ‘Posh and Becks’—have regularly occupied the media lime-light since the start of their relationship in 1997. In these various spheres—as a footballing legend, half of a celebrity couple and a fashion icon—Beckham has attracted hype and vilification in equal measures.

Significantly, Beckham’s iconicity has given rise to many lucrative marketing initiatives and sponsorship deals, in a phenomenon widely referred to as ‘Brand Beckham’. In some respects, then, Beckham may be understood as a branded commodity with global reach, and available for ‘consumption’ through the commercialisation of football, celebrity magazines, his own branded clothing range for younger children, and the various brands and products he endorses. Soon after his contract with LA Galaxy was announced, LA Galaxy president, Alexi Lalas, went on the record as saying that David Beckham is ‘worth every penny [of his five-year deal worth $250m]; since we announced the deal we’ve sold thousands of tickets and shirts…He will help revolutionise Major League Soccer economically and from a football point of view.’ Lalas continued: ‘He has given the club a lot although he hasn’t even played yet. If you want something great, you have to pay for it’ [BBC News, 29 January 2007).

Significant interest has been shown by the academic community in David Beckham as a contemporary cultural and consumer icon and as a brand in his own right (see Cashmore and Parker, 2003; Giardina, 2003; Ireson, 2001). For example, Parker and Steinberg (2004) argue that Beckham’s iconicity seems to have arisen from ‘an ability to embody profoundly contradictory qualities, which play out on a number of terrains simultaneously: popular masculinity, sporting excellence, colossal economic capital, physical glamour and emotions’. Indeed, the quality of engagement generated by the subject of David Beckham in our study could in part be explained by children’s complex perceptions of him as the embodiment of seemingly contradictory qualities. As will be demonstrated in the remainder of this section, the children apparently experienced tensions in trying to interpret the extent to which Beckham’s increasingly intensified commodification could be understood as ‘right’ and/or ‘wrong’, ‘good’ and/or ‘bad’.

**Findings**

Having been asked by the interviewer whether David Beckham was ‘cool’ or ‘not cool’, the children went on, unprompted, to focus on Beckham’s participation in commercial spheres. Following Tappan, we suggest that, in our study, children—as
well as significant adults connected to the children—drew on Beckham as a ‘socio-cultural tool’ or ‘mediational means.’ We now turn to an exploration of the data which illustrates a) children’s experience of adult narratives which constitute David Beckham as a ‘role model’ and b) the debates and discussions around ‘showing off’ and ‘trying too hard’ which enabled children to grapple with complexities and hold moral ambiguities around Beckham’s increasingly intensified engagement in commercial spheres. The data we present consists of relevant interview extracts, accompanied by our qualitative interpretation of the data.

**Perseverance as a moral lesson**

Children are exposed to narratives in which Beckham is positioned as a role model, and they see ‘perseverance’ as one of the key qualities which helps them to understand Beckham in this way. A number of children told the story of Beckham being sent off during the 1998 World Cup, and expressed admiration for the way in which he became a stronger player following this low point in his career. In an 11-year-old boy’s words:

‘...I think he’s quite uh, hard inside because sort of things we got told about the 1998 World Cup when he missed a penalty – when he fouled, yes. But he was sent off and everyone in England blamed it on him and most people would’ve just left England and deserted to another country...So he’s quite tough...I admire that he, like, didn’t just run away from it all. He faced up to it, and played the best football that he could.”

*(Boy, single-sex Year 6 group, private school)*

This child seems to be articulating, with a certain degree of clarity and sophistication, a particular set of attributes and/or behaviours which are to be applauded: in this case, ‘facing up to’ difficulties, doing one’s ‘best’, and being ‘tough’ and ‘hard inside’. Interestingly, the children we interviewed would have been babies and toddlers in 1998, and indeed it appears that accounts of Beckham are in part shaped by the stories they themselves have been told by adults or by the media. On occasion, children recounted instances in which such stories were shared with the intention to instil ‘perseverance’, ‘hard work’, and ‘courage in the face of adversity’ as positive qualities to strive towards, as the following extract suggests:

*Boy 1:* Um, yeah, David Beckham, he’s good at football, and, um, coz Mr. Rover was saying at Assembly the other day about the abuse he was suffering from, um, coz of a match against Argentina a while ago, not sure when, when he kicked someone coz he was a bit annoyed. Coz he was on the floor coz he just –  
*Boy 2:* That guy dived!  
*Boy 1:* Yeah, I know.  
*Interviewer:* Ok, so…  
*Boy 1:* And he was being abused by everybody.  
*Girl 1:* Yeah, he got sent off.  
*Boy 1:* And then in the match, or two years later, or in the next season, he was doing just amazing. He did, he gave 200%, as Mr. Rover says.  
*Interviewer:* So why do you think that Mr. Rover was telling you this story?  
*Boy 1:* Err, because he didn’t give up when a lot of players probably would have, and he had the courage to face all the people who were abusing him.
Thus we see that, in part, discourses which present Beckham as a role model seem to be constructed in interactions amongst children and significant adults. In the example presented above, it seems evident that the head-teacher perceived that the story of David Beckham’s ‘fall from grace’ and his eventual ‘redemption’ would be an engaging and valuable lesson for children. Tappan would argue that such discourses, with their moral lessons and learned virtues, could be seen as cultural tools which children (and adults) appropriate and use in order to “make sense of and understand a particular social situation, and thus to construct a response to the [moral] question[s]” (2006:10). In this case, the relevant moral questions, if explicitly framed, might have been along the lines of: How might we make amends for past mistakes? What is the appropriate way to respond to criticism and adversity? Understood in this way, engagement with the seemingly remote foibles of public figures like David Beckham allows children to tease out responses to moral questions which are directly relevant and significant to them, even at a relatively young age.

That such forms of discourse are co-constructed is indicated by a 10-year-old girl’s reflections on David Beckham’s own account of his life, as presented in his autobiography:

“He’s had like, goods and bads in his life and when he writes his autobiography so you actually know what he’s been through and everything, so I think you should give him a bit of respect for what he does and everything, but sometimes he just takes it over the top.”

_Mixed Year 6 group, private school_

The preoccupation with ‘taking it over the top’ and ‘showing off’
The latter sentiment (going ‘over the top’) is a common theme in discussions around Beckham. The 10-year old girl quoted above expresses empathy in relation to ‘the goods and bads in his life’ and ‘what he’s been through’, as well as ‘respect for what he does’. Thus, she seems to be differentiating between what she understands as the actuality of his life, which she is able to view with respect and appreciation, and what she understands as a tendency by David Beckham to want to stretch this further somehow, or ‘take it over the top’.

So what does ‘taking it over the top’ mean in this context? The accusation would seem to refer to several dimensions of Beckham’s conduct and children’s value judgments around these. In part, Beckham’s perceived tendency to ‘over-do’ things seems to be closely associated with the care and attention which he gives to his appearance, and which is evidently off-putting to some children. For example, a 10-year-old boy explains:

“I don’t know, I just sort of feel, I dunno like, he just tries to look, like handsome…But he ends up being, looking like he wants to look handsome. Like he’s trying too hard.”

_Mixed Year 6 group, state school_

The discomfort expressed by the child above is likely to be rooted, at least in part, in hegemonic understandings of gender identity and traditional masculinity, which
Beckham’s behaviour might be understood to challenge to some degree. Additionally, we contend that the above quote says something about children’s perceptions around (in)authenticity. Whilst the children are able to appreciate Beckham’s perseverance, determination and hard work in relation to his sporting career as positive virtues, it would seem that in relation to physical appearance effortlessness is to be preferred to exertion. In ‘trying too hard’ to present himself as handsome, he somehow renders his position as handsomely as inauthentic. We suggest that this could be interpreted as a rejection of Beckham’s intentional, self-conscious project to present and ‘sell’ himself, as the following point made by an 8-year-old girl suggests:

“I quite like him, the only thing I don’t like about him is [that] he thinks too much about himself and his hairstyles, he sometimes, every match, he sometimes he just has his hair in a different place.”

(Mixed Year 3 group, private school)

It is significant that the child quoted above explains that what she finds disquieting is that ‘he thinks too much about himself’. It is of course possible that this represents a slip of the tongue, and that what she meant to say was that he ‘thinks too much of himself’. The latter phraseology would support a reading of Beckham being perceived as arrogant, while the actual phrase used suggests that he is seen as somewhat self-obsessed, and moreover, consciously and deliberately constructing himself somehow (‘he thinks too much about himself’). This intentional self-construction is seemingly embodied through his choice of hair style, but more importantly, through the perception that he is continually changing styles, and doing so in the public eye (‘in every match’).

A 10-year-old boy from a different group also expresses distaste in relation to Beckham’s fashion choices and constantly changing appearance:

“Well, I’m, I’m, I don’t particularly like him because he’s a bit of a – he’s always trying, I dunno, diamond earrings on which are worth 2 million pounds, which is actually pointless…And he’s, kind of always shows off and like getting new hairstyles every week isn’t – it’s very odd…”

(Single-sex Year 6 group, private school)

The child’s assertion that Beckham is ‘always trying on diamond earrings; that he ‘always shows off’; and that he ‘[gets] new hairstyles every week’ could be saying something about David Beckham’s active and unceasing involvement in presenting and calling attention to himself. ‘Showing off’ seems to refer to several types of behaviour, including conspicuous and wanton consumption: consider, for example, the boy’s reference to the ‘pointless[ness]’ of the £2 million diamond earrings.

In a related vein, and as will be demonstrated later, ‘showing off’ seems also to refer to a) actively courting high visibility in the press and b) flaunting one’s wealth, status and other assets (including, in the case of the male person, physical attractiveness). Hence, value judgments around the appropriateness of ‘showing off’ seem to revolve around what it is that is being rendered too visible or obvious. In this case, Beckham’s actions would seem to be making the planned and conscious element of his branded image too obvious, highlighting the fact that the commodified image of
Beckham which is available for public consumption is not authentically him, but something that is purposefully styled and staged. (For a recent exploration of the dynamics of artists’ [manufactured] authenticity and audiences’ responses and interpretations of [in]authenticity around this, see Ladkin, 2007).

“Showing off” seems also to encompass the act of receiving too much money in exchange for insufficient work/effort. This led the children to engage with questions around just and proportionate reward, to which we now turn.

**The question of proportionate reward**

While the children seem to make sense of Beckham’s sporting achievements as worthy of respect and celebration, the levels of material success he has attained seem to be experienced as somewhat unsettling, and give rise to questions about proportionate and just reward. In the interview extract presented below, the children appear to draw—whether consciously or unconsciously—on the opportunities offered by the present dialogical interchange to affirm their own evolving understanding of what proportionate and just reward would mean in this context. At the same time, engagement in such a dialogical space allows children to practice navigating the subtleties and uncertainties which arise. The differences of opinion give rise to some interesting tensions, which ‘hit a nerve’ with some of these children who are on the edge of puberty, relating to how they make sense of others’ viewpoints and how these impact on aspects of their own self-concepts. It should be noted that in current British parlance ‘fit’ relates to sexual attractiveness rather than athletic condition.

**Girl 1:** I hate David Beckham, he’s horrible, he just shows off, every magazine I read, he’s in there, he just shows off.

**Girl 2:** Do you know why, cause he’s actually fit and no one else is fitter than him and that’s why he’s always in the magazines and adverts –

**Boy 1:** For one advert he must get about five million pounds!

**Girl 2:** That’s cause he’s mega fit.

**Boy 1:** Stop saying that, it’s scary!

**Girl 2:** I’m trying to get round to you that he is F-I-T, that does spell ‘fit’!

(Mixed Year 6 group, state school)

The above exchange demonstrates that while some children expressed disbelief and discomfort at the material wealth and high visibility commanded by Beckham, others viewed his fame and fortune matter-of-factly, as the just reward for the qualities he embodies, in particular his physical attributes. While the boy and the first girl seem to be of the opinion that Beckham cannot possibly be worthy of such intense media attention and admiration, nor of such colossal economic capital, the second girl argues that it is his inherent, real and absolute claim to ‘fitness’ or sexual attraction (‘he’s actually fit and no one else is fitter than him’) which explains and justify why this is so. Hence, we see tensions experienced in interpreting the extent to which the hype around David Beckham could be seen as (dis)proportionate and/or (un)justified.

Of course, the question with which the children grapple, regarding whether the immense material rewards reaped by celebrity sports-people are appropriate, is one which reflects undercurrents of discontent in a society in which increasingly vast gaps
in material wealth are experienced. The extract below provides further evidence that common discourses around ‘right-ness’ and ‘wrong-ness’ are socially constructed and situated within specific socio-historical contexts:

_Boy 1:_ I think he’s a bit of a show off.
_Interviewer:_ A bit of a show off. Do you hear much about him? Like on TV…
_Boy 1:_ Yeah, in the paper, that’s where I’ve got that thing from, that he gets like loads of money, and my dad was reading it, and then, coz he doesn’t like him either, I think. And then he says “Blimey, he gets lots of money, for just sort of sitting around, doing nothing.”

(Single-sex Year 6 group, state school)

Indeed, the many references to Beckham’s participation in adverts and the speculation as to the large sums he receives in exchange may be interpreted as a critique of the increasing commercialisation of soccer players. This is again a trend which has elicited its share of condemnation from spectators of many walks of life. Such condemnation forms part of a situated, common discourse upon which children seem to glibly draw.

**Appreciation of complexity and uncertainty**

We would argue that an important quality of children’s discussions around David Beckham is their apparent appreciation of some of the subtleties, complexities and uncertainties which are inherent in making sense of and passing judgment on others’ actions. Shortly after the (somewhat heated) ‘F-I-T’ debate in reply to one of the boys’ accusation that ‘All he thinks about is adverts’, the second girl again defends Beckham, saying: ‘…he does, like, think about his family, because he has actually just had, what’s the baby called, Cruise, that’s it, and I think Brooklyn’s a lot like him…’. In their debates around David Beckham the children grapple with the paradox of a man who epitomises the increasingly commercialised world _par excellence_ and who can, at the same time, be construed as an active and engaged father and husband, a male pin-up, and furthermore, as a role model in relation to sporting achievement, perseverance and hard work, and as an ambassador of England and long-term captain of the national team in what is popularly construed as the national sport.

Children come face to face with the many ambiguities and complexities involved in making sense of what David Beckham’s persistent and intensified participation in commercial spheres means for his positioning as a successful sportsman, team captain, a would-be role model, and even a committed family man. The 8-year-old girl quoted below, for example, attempts to articulate her sense that ‘fame’ and ‘performance’ do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. If anything, the child seems to be pointing to a causal link between ‘thinking too much of himself’ and what she sees as his flagging performance:

“Yeah I like [David Beckham]…I just think he plays very well…but he’s starting to think too much of himself and he’s not getting so good anymore, coz he’s thinking too much of himself…I just think that it’s best when he’s not famous.”

(Mixed Year 3 group, private school)
We therefore contend that while at times the children seemed able to articulate their perspectives quite clearly—for example, their apparent dislike of Beckham’s ‘cashing in’ on adverts—their discussions also evidenced an appreciation of the tensions and uncertainties involved in making such judgments. In the tail-end of a discussion in which the children express their disapproval of the media attention allegedly coveted by David and Victoria Beckham, the children are also able to construct an argument which appreciates a different perspective: the manipulative role of the media and the unhelpfulness of apportioning blame unilaterally:


Boy 1: I think it’s wrong how the press can manipulate people, I think they should be, they should have to get permission from the person who they are writing the story on to publish the story.
Interviewer: Uh-huh.
Boy 1: I reckon they should be able to fine people for, newspapers for writing, discriminating…
Boy 2: Yeah saying like he’s with (inaudible).
Interviewer: OK, so you think that the press manipulate him in a way?
Boy 1: Like naming the new child like on the radio before they’ve even got out for, you know -
Boy 2: It’s like before they left the hospital told the press, and then they like, I reckon they should’ve asked them for permission coz they told the hospital that they didn’t want anyone to know and they told the press that…
Interviewer: Ok, so you don’t really like the way the press does that then?
Boy 1: No.
Boy 2: No, I think it’s wrong.
Boy 1: Even though like not many people like him and lots of people would like him to get out of football and like be a normal person, I think it’s still quite wrong that he should just get blamed for all those things.

(Single-sex Year 6 group, state school)

Hence, although aspects of the children’s discussions seem to suggest that they hold David Beckham himself responsible for the choices made in positioning himself as something other than ‘a normal person’, some children are also able to appreciate the role of the popular media and of the ‘public gaze’ in contributing to such constructions.

By and large, the moral perspectives evidenced in the children’s conversations seemed less to do with abstracting, intellectualising or achieving a final clarity around their convictions. Rather, an important aspect of these conversations seemed to be that of appreciating and navigating the tensions and convolutions encountered when making sense of David Beckham as a complex cultural icon. An 11-year-old girl appreciates the intensity of feeling with which conversations around Beckham are sometimes imbued, and is able to acknowledge that she finds herself both drawn and conflicted by such strength of feeling:

“\textit{I don’t know what I think about him because he is, he’s been in so much, because my cousin was a huge fan of him and Man United, but then he absolutely hated him and cut up all his shirts because he moved to Real Madrid. And he thought that he betrayed Man United, but many people don’t like actually know what happened behind all the football and stuff, so, I don’t}”
know what to think of him, but I think he’s a bit of a show-off and I do take
the mick out of him sometimes.”

(Mixed Year 6 group, private school)

Following on from two boys’ comments: ‘...he doesn’t need to do other stuff like
modelling’ and ‘Yeah, he just wastes his time, I mean he’s got so much money, I
mean, what can you spend it all on?’ she continues to put forward an alternative
perspective which complicates and clouds the matter, and highlights the more facile
and off-hand nature of the boys’ comments:

“He might be in debt though, that’s the only problem coz many people, you
think they’re amazingly rich but they show their house and everything and
you wonder why they make so much exposure to their family and everything,
then you think, oh my gosh, they’re in so much debt they have to do this.”

Summary of findings
This paper has presented evidence that children’s discourses and related value
judgments around David Beckham are socially and culturally mediated. Of course
‘maturational influences’ remain important, and it is worth noting that by and large
children of Year 6 were more articulate and ready to participate in such discussions
than children of Year 3. However, we would argue that children’s engagement with
an increasingly commercialised world needs to be understood not solely through
attention to individual cognitive reasoning but also through attention to the
‘mediational means’ and ‘socio-cultural tools’ (Tappan, 2006) upon which they draw
in forming judgments and interpreting what is going on around them, some of which
emerge from and/or specifically respond to this commercialised world. The
‘mediational means’ and ‘socio-cultural tools’ upon which children drew in our study
included hegemonic understandings of masculinity; evolving understandings of the
nature of paid employment, wealth distribution, economic capital and debt; the
language of individual rights, responsibility and culpability; and such commonly-
accepted virtues as ‘perseverance’, ‘hard work’, ‘modesty’ and ‘loyalty to one’s
country/team’. Engagement with iconic figures such as David Beckham may thus be
seen as a medium through which children articulate, affirm and reinforce their
understandings of what is considered ‘good’ in their social context(s), and it would
appear that adult narratives which frame David Beckham as a role model are
underpinned by this intention.

At the same time, engagement with a concrete, complex figure ‘muddies’
understandings and brings into relief some of the complexity associated with making
such decisions (for example, at what point does ‘perseverance’ cross the line into
‘trying too hard’?). Specifically, children’s dialogue around such complex figures
allows them to critically engage with such ‘grey’ areas as consumerism, self-
promotion, celebrity status, material wealth and media representation, and to form
their own (socially and culturally mediated) perspectives on the extent to which these
dynamics are ‘good’ and/or ‘bad’. We would argue that there is also space within
these conversations for children, in the company of adults, to consider the extent to
which the moral judgments and moral voices they are articulating are rooted in
defensive, restrictive and/or unreflective understandings of goodness, rightness and
wrongness.
Implications
We believe that our findings help to illuminate two distinct but related ethical dimensions surrounding children’s engagement with an increasingly commercialised world: the first relates to understanding children and the second to the moral responsibility of adults.

Understanding children
We firmly believe that if we are to help children navigate their increasingly commercialised lives, we need to go beyond simply ascertaining whether they understand the persuasive intent of marketing directed towards them. We need to understand a lot more about the complex social roles which brands and celebrities play in children’s everyday lives. We have argued that, in order to do this, we need to develop alternative understandings of moral development which emphasise its situated, contextual, dialogic and constructed nature. Such an understanding of moral development would enable us to see that a seamless commercial world of toys, TV shows, music, adverts, and celebrities may give children opportunities to explore their understandings of what constitutes ethical or moral behaviour, and of how to pursue ‘a good life’.

Based on our emerging understanding of children as moral actors and as participants in moral discourses in the messy contexts of their everyday lives, we can tentatively begin to identify some of the implications for teachers, parents, and policy-makers concerned with children’s moral education. Firstly, our findings suggest that through engaging with concrete figures and specific situations of interest to them, children are able to make space for individual and collaborative sense-making and debate around what they experience as the relevant ambiguities and issues of tension and contention. Thus we advocate that any effort to engage children in formal education around morality and values would do well to a) privilege those subjects of study and discussion which the children themselves identify as being of relevance and interest to them; b) attend to the common discourses on which children draw, and recognise that moral choices and moral voices are inherent and implicit within these; and c) begin from the specific moral ambiguities, uncertainties and tensions which children choose to get ‘stuck into’.

Secondly, and following on from point ‘c’, those concerned with children’s moral education would do well to recognise children’s emerging ability to hold tensions and to appreciate some of the complexity and uncertainty involved in making value judgments. Arguably, many children’s stories rely on simplistic representations of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’ and on versions of ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’ archetypes. The implication is that, alongside proposing particular ‘role models’ and specific moral values and/or frameworks (around ‘democracy’ and ‘Britishness’, for example), teachers, parents, and policy-makers need to consider how children’s moral education could be constituted so as to facilitate debate and the development of critical reflexiveness. We would thus privilege those approaches which incorporate informal conversation, debate, and criticality, and which acknowledge and reflect on the tensions and insolubility often felt by people when attempting to make sense of the human condition and of their lived experience. We argue that such approaches are likely to be experienced as more meaningful and effective than those grounded in the assumption that complex human dynamics such as ‘Britishness’ can be packaged and ‘taught’ in straight-forward, unidirectional ways.
Thirdly, and following on from all of the above, an understanding of ourselves—both children and adults—as implicitly moral persons engaged in moral discourse and moral action in the messy contexts of our everyday lives signifies an explicit shift in the ways in which we might talk about ethical decision-making and value judgments with our children. In particular, we can communicate to them that common discourses around morality, appropriate human conduct, and ‘the good life’ are not static, and that critically engaging with alternative interpretations in their everyday lives and in interaction with others is an important part of developing moral voices. As significant adults, we can help children to make sense of the challenges and opportunities involved in adopting and resisting prevailing moral discourses. Furthermore, we may help children to see that they will continually be faced with choices regarding how they interpret morality and themselves and others as moral persons, and that claims of uncertainty and confusion (‘I don’t know what to think’) may represent not moral immaturity, but a moral self in the thick of critical engagement with complex questions and with opportunities for morality-in-the-making.

**Moral responsibility of adults**

We contend that adults, in their varying and multiple roles, have contributed to the construction of David Beckham as a complex cultural icon, and to the construction of the various discourses and lenses upon which children draw in making sense of what Beckham represents, and in particular, of how his actions and behaviour could be understood. This leads to a consideration of the moral responsibility of adults with multiple (and somewhat conflicting) roles to play in relation to **both children and** the commercial world, as parents, educators, employers, employees, sports-spectators, consumers, marketers and significantly, as participants in and commentators on the social spaces which they, and their children, occupy. Thus we also concur with Tappan’s (2006) assertion that understanding moral development as a process that is fundamentally dialogical—as opposed to fundamentally individualistic and psychological—challenges us to understand so-called developmental ‘deficits’ and ‘delays’ not as personal problems, but as social problems: “problems, in other words, that demand political (not simply ‘clinical’ or ‘educational’) solutions” (Tappan, 2006:15).

The burden of responsibility and vigilance therefore falls, at least in part, to adults in their various roles, both as self-appointed guardians of childhood, and as direct and indirect shapers of the wide range of commercial influences and hegemonic discourses with which children are presented in the specific socio-cultural contexts which they occupy. We might therefore ask questions around how we collaboratively construct particular scenarios in which it is acceptable to evidence ‘effort’ and ‘perseverance’, but others in which it is unacceptable, and what the implications are in creating and/or reinforcing particular ideals: around ‘doing one’s best’ in terms of sporting achievement and career ambitions, and around ‘trying too hard’ in terms of self-promotion and physical appearance, for example. How do we draw the parameters around the rightness and/or wrongness of others’ earning power, and can we examine the changing socio-economic circumstances which make monetary worth so widely divergent between different groups of people and types of endeavours? If we see the child’s comment that we ‘don’t actually know what happened behind all the football and stuff’ as a comment imbued with moral consideration, are we drawn
to question the extent to which it is ‘right’ to judge others from the position of uninformed outsiders and the extent to which these kinds of judgments further our own pursuit of ‘a good life’? And, indeed what is the nature and quality of the information upon which we draw in judging ourselves and others?

Thus we contend that as part of our preoccupation with children’s moral development and with how our children are impacted by an increasingly commercialised world, we need to expand the focus of our attention. We need to also critically consider the ways in which we contribute to the emergence and ratification of the common discourses upon which children draw in a) establishing their own sense of morality and b) making sense of and responding to commercial influences.

Limitations and Further Research
The research was limited to discussions with children in two schools, both located in the same city in the South West of England. Future studies should work with a more diverse sample of children from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

Our analysis concentrated on one celebrity from the field of sport. Future work could usefully explore how children’s moral discourses unfold around popular bands, particularly ‘manufactured’ groups such as NSYNC; or around TV shows such as Friends or The Simpsons.

Moreover, having given support to understandings of moral development which emphasise its contextual and situated nature, future research designs could create opportunities for children to explore the moral dilemmas which are immediately relevant to them in their own lives and could pursue the role of both adults and children in co-constructing, reinforcing and resisting particular moral discourses.

Conclusion
Through this paper we have sought to contribute new insights to the literatures on consumer socialisation, marketing to children, and children’s moral development.

We have argued that the prevailing and sometimes competing discourses articulated and appropriated (Tappan, 2006) by the children in our study appeared to be constructed and reinforced through a combination of complex social dynamics, including day-by-day interactions with peer groups and with significant adults, as well as increasingly seamless and ubiquitous commercial influences. Attention to the nature and the quality of the ‘hidden persuaders’ (Nairn and Berthon, 1999) and ‘socio-cultural tools’ which we provide children access to, either intentionally or unintentionally, becomes of prime importance, as Tappan (2006) eloquently suggests:

…When mediated action (‘agents-acting-with-mediational-means’), dialogue and the socio-cultural context…become the focus for the study of moral development, then moral education becomes less about ‘teaching’ the young right and wrong, and more about ensuring that the social world provides just and compassionate moral mediational means for the young to appropriate – to master and to own. (Tappan, 2006:15-16)

As evidenced by our findings, engagement with celebrities and commercial symbols may make space for values and norms to be reinforced, and tensions to be held,
regarding what is expected of an individual in terms of success and achievement; modesty and humility; innocence and culpability; dedication to family and loyalty to one’s team and country; the worth of one’s work and spending power. One implication for marketers is that the ethical dimension of targeting children is not bounded by children’s cognitive understanding of persuasive intent; rather, the ethical implications of marketing to children extend to the specific values and norms which are embodied and reinforced in marketing messages, and upon which children may draw in formulating their own understandings of what is (un)acceptable and (un)desirable in their society.

Furthermore, through engagement with processes and acts of commodification children can come to form and articulate their own (albeit culturally and socially mediated) judgments regarding the extent to which they can see value in such commodification. This in itself should be of interest to marketing practitioners and researchers, as they reflect on how children make sense of and respond to an increasingly commercialised world, in the multiple roles that they occupy, not only as active consumers, but as spectators, commentators, opinion-leaders and influencers vis-à-vis consumer culture.

Finally, we suggest that the children in our study were—implicitly if not explicitly—engaging in discussion around moral action and expressing moral voices. Moral discourses emerged not in self-conscious, forced or abstractive ways, but naturally, in the ebbs and flows of conversation. Understanding moral development in this way focuses our attention on the processes by which we, in relationship with one another, continually shape and reshape the boundaries of what is socially acceptable, and engage with questions around what is right and what will lead to the ‘good life’. In commercial, educational and domestic contexts, as in other spheres of life, we may therefore need to engage each other—both children and adults—in conversations which explicitly consider the question of how our moral discourses and understandings of ‘the good life’ are established, and of how these might be challenged and shifted. Most importantly, these kinds of conversations need to be seen not only as the domain of philosophers and students of meta-ethics, but as legitimate questions to ask in relation to content-, context- and person-specific ethical dilemmas.
References


