



The psychological foundations and consequences of moral conviction

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Moral conviction refers to a meta-cognitive belief that a given position is based on one's core moral beliefs and convictions. Attitudes that are high in moral conviction ('moral mandates') differ from equally strong but non-moral attitudes in a host of ways. Among other things, stronger moral convictions are associated with (a) believing that one's attitude is more universally applicable and objectively true, (b) greater political engagement (e.g., voting, political activism), (c) greater preferred social and physical distance from those who disagree, (d) increase resistance to compromise, (e) inoculation from the usual pressures to obey authorities and the law, and (f) increased acceptance of violent solutions to conflict. Implications are discussed.

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Attitudes are positive or negative evaluations of people, places, things, events, or ideas. Moral conviction refers to a meta-cognition that people may have about a given attitude, that is, that the attitude is grounded in core beliefs about fundamental right and wrong [1]. Building on concepts and ideas from social domain theory [2-4], and moral philosophy [5-7], theorists have proposed several major ways that attitudes high in moral conviction (also referred to as 'moral mandates') are different from non-moral attitudes, such as attitudes rooted in preference or normative convention [1]. Personal preferences represent attitudes that people see as based on individual discretion or taste. For example, one person's position on recycling might be based on a preference to not take the time to sort her trash. Another person's attitude about recycling could be based more on the norms in her community; because almost everyone in her community recycles, she does as well. A third person, however, might

be morally committed to recycling: Recycling for him represents an absolute good. The degree to which one perceives an attitude as rooted in one's core moral beliefs and convictions has a number of implications for people's issue-related thoughts, feelings, and behavior, including

(a) perceptions of objectivism and universalism, (b) political engagement, (c) intolerance of attitude dissimilarity, (d) authority and peer independence, (e) difficulty in generating procedural solutions to conflict, (f) resistance to compromise, and (g) acceptance of vigilantism and violence to achieve a moral end, something we review in more detail below.

Objectivism and universalism

One way that moral mandates psychologically differ from preferences and convention is the degree to which they are seen as universally applicable and objectively true. Unlike attitudes rooted in preference or convention, people do not accept or expect that their moral convictions are or should be contextually contingent or situationally variable, and tend to be offended by the idea that morality can be relative. For example, people morally convicted that abortion is wrong are likely to believe it is objectively and universally wrong. Consistent with this idea, people rate self-nominated moral convictions as equal in universal applicability and objective truth value as self-nominated scientific facts, but higher in universal applicability and objective truth value than their strong preferences — results that were independent of reported attitude strength [8]. In other words, the degree to which someone's attitude about abortion reflects a moral conviction also predicts the degree to which they think this practice should be universally banned (or permitted), as well as the degree to which they think this position is as objectively true as the idea that $2 + 2 = 4$. In addition, simply priming a given attitude domain, for example, by having participants read an essay about a policy, is associated with an increase from pre-prime to post-prime commitments to a universalistic moral philosophy when people's attitude about the issue is high (but not low) in moral conviction [8]. In further support of the idea that people experience their moral convictions much as they do facts, there is an implicit association between objectivity and moral conviction on an implicit associations test (or IAT) [9]. Taken together, people experience their moral convictions as if they were readily observable, objective truths about the world that universally generalize across contexts — factors that might explain why moral mandates have the psychological consequences they do.

Political engagement

Stronger moral convictions about salient issues and/or political candidates predict intentions to vote and actual voting behavior — results that have replicated across three presidential election cycles in the U.S., and that hold even when controlling for strength of candidate

preference or partisanship [10[•]]. People with stronger moral convictions about a given issue are also more likely to engage in cause-related activism or collective action, results that have replicated across a range of issues including physician-assisted suicide and the Iraq War [11], unionization efforts [12], gender equality [13[•]], tuition increases and genetically modified food [14], social inequality [16], and abortion [15[•]]. Moreover, moral conviction is an equal opportunity motivator of political engagement for those on the right and left [10[•],17[•]].

Intolerance of attitude dissimilarity

People are more socially intolerant, that is, they do not want to work with, live near, shop at a store owned by, or even sit too near to someone who does not share their position on issues when their attitude on that issue is morally mandated — an effect that holds even when controlling for a variety of indices of attitude strength

[1[•],18,19[•]]. This moral intolerance also extends to a greater willingness to behaviorally discriminate [19[•]].

Authority independence

Legitimacy typically creates a duty and obligation to obey authority as an imperative that replaces personal interests as a guide or motivation [20]. However, when people's morally convicted attitudes are at stake, people's acceptance of even legitimate authorities' decisions (e.g., the U.S. Supreme Court) depends on whether authorities yield decisions consistent with observers' morally preferred conclusions [21,22,23[•],24[•]]. People do not only react negatively to decisions with which they morally disagree; the morally convicted do not trust legitimate

authorities to make the right decision in the first place [25[•]].

Peer independence

Moral conviction not only inoculates people from authority influence, it inoculates them from peer influence as well. People typically conform when faced with the choice to accept or reject a majority opinion, in part because they want to avoid ridicule or exclusion [26] or because they are unsure about the appropriate way to behave, and they assume the majority is correct [27]. Moral conviction decreases these pressures because people want to distance themselves from those with whom they morally disagree [1[•]] and because they believe they know the correct answer [9]. For example, moral conviction is associated with even stronger intentions to engage in cause-relevant activism when people believe they are in the opinion minority, rather than majority (an example of counter-conformity) [28[•],29[•]]. Moral conviction is also

associated with immunity from majority group influence in a computerized version of the Asch paradigm [30[•]]. In summary, moral conviction not only inoculates people from authority dictates or the rule of law, it also inoculates them from the very powerful effects of majority influence.

Unwillingness to compromise

Moral convictions are experienced as absolute and first order goods; to compromise a moral belief is therefore unthinkable. Consistent with this idea, people who moralize their political attitudes are more opposed to the general idea of political compromise, and people who moralize specific issues resist bargains and compromise on those same issues [31]. Moreover, moral conviction predicts opposition to political candidates who are willing to negotiate with political opponents, results that did not reduce to various indices of attitude strength, such as attitude importance or certainty. People similarly cannot agree to procedural solutions for conflicts when competing sides both have strong moral convictions about their desired outcomes [1[•]].

Violence

There is also evidence that people are willing to accept violent solutions to conflict when doing so yields morally preferred ends. For example, people who had strong moral convictions that either the guilty be convicted or that the innocent be acquitted rated the death of a defendant as equally just or unjust (respectively) regardless of whether he died in an act of vigilantism or was legally executed. Participants only rated due process as fairer than vigilante justice when they did not have a moral conviction about defendant guilt or innocence [32]. Similarly, people with stronger moral conviction about gender pay equity reported greater support for various forms of illegal protest, including sabotage and violence [17[•]]. Although stronger moral convictions were associated with greater desires for peace among Israeli Doves, stronger moral convictions among Israeli Hawks predicted greater desires to punish Palestinians, and stronger endorsements of bombing Palestinian missile sites even if there would be considerable civilian collateral damage in the 2009-2010 Gaza War [33[•]]. In short, people are willing to tolerate even high levels of violence if it serves a morally convicted end.

In summary, people sometimes experience attitudes as held with moral conviction, that is, as reflecting their beliefs about fundamental questions of right and wrong, if not good and evil. Attitudes held with moral conviction differ from most non-moral attitudes in the degree to which they are experienced as universally and objectively true. People's strength of moral conviction about specific issues is related to issue-specific political engagement, inoculation against the usual pressures to obey authorities and the law about that issue, and greater acceptance of violent solutions to achieve their morally vested ends.

The normative implications of these and other findings are both reassuring and potentially terrifying. Moral mandates clearly provide people with the courage they need to stand up in the name of their beliefs, sometimes even at great cost. It is difficult to imagine any fight for justice in entrenched authority systems without moral conviction. That said, moral mandates are also associated with the rejection of the rule of law, and could provide a motivational foundation for violent protest and acts of terrorism. In short, moral mandates are double-edged swords: They seem equally likely to serve as the motivational foundations for normative forms of both great good and potential evil.

Morality is in the eye of the beholder

Researchers often treat certain issues (e.g., abortion) and dilemmas (e.g., trolley problems) as if everyone were certain to recognize and agree on the moral essence or fundamental character of the issue or dilemma. Assessing the degree to which people see any given issue as rooted in moral conviction predicts a host of important consequences. There is emerging evidence that knowing whether a judgment — something qualitatively different from an attitude — reflects people's moral conviction matters as well. For example, when participants were asked the extent to which their choice in the 'bystander at the switch' version of the trolley problem was related to their core moral beliefs and convictions, only slightly more than half responded above the midpoint of the scale [34].

Moreover, variance in the degree to which people saw the dilemma in a moral light predicted whether they negatively reacted to someone who made the 'wrong' choice in the dilemma [35,36]. To make scientific claims about morality — whether those claims are about moral attitudes, judgments, or goals — therefore appears to require empirically establishing, rather than assuming, that people's sense of morality is in fact active in that situation.

References and recommended reading

Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
 - .. of outstanding interest
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A meta-analysis of 23 samples and across 42 issues revealed liberals reported stronger moral convictions than conservatives on the issues of climate change, the environment, gender equality, income inequality, healthcare reform, and education. Conservatives report stronger moral convictions about abortion, immigration, states' rights, gun control, physician-assisted suicide, the budget deficit, and the Federal budget. No differences emerged across 29 other political issues, and strength of moral convictions predicted intentions to vote, voting, and activism equally strongly for those on the political right and left.

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16. Effron DA, Miller DT: How the moralization of issues grants social legitimacy to act on one's attitudes. *Pers Soc Psychol B* 2012, 38:690-701. Moral conviction provided greater perceived psychological standing to advocate and act on behalf of those convictions, even in the absence of any material stake in an issue (Studies 1 and 2), and crime victims were perceived as more entitled to special redress when the crime violated their moral values (Studies 3 and 4).

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17. Ryan TJ: Reconsidering moral issues in politics. *J Polit* 2014, 76:380-397.
Moral conviction associated with both economic (e.g., social security) and social (e.g., same-sex marriage) issues were strongest among party extremists (but equally strong for Republicans and Democrats), and predicted increased punitive feelings toward issue opponents and engagement in politics, effects that did not reduce to religiosity. Individual differences in moral conviction — not so much whether an issue is normatively moral — predicted relevant political variables.
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Moral conviction predicted social intolerance of attitude dissimilarity in both mainland Chinese and American samples (i.e., they did not want someone with a different attitude as a friend, or to move into their neighborhood) but only predicted political intolerance in the Chinese sample (i.e., willingness to restrict political freedoms).
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Identifying an attitude as moral (as compared to being non-moral) was associated with greater intolerance of, less sharing with, and greater physical distancing from people who do not share that attitude, effects that were respectively stronger when participants also reported that moral attitudes were high rather than low in emotional intensity.
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