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Why Don't Moral People Act Morally? Motivational Considerations

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Abstract

Failure of moral people to act morally is usually attributed to either learning deficits or situational pressures. We believe that it is also important to consider the nature of moral motivation. Is the goal actually to be moral (moral integrity) or only to appear moral while, if possible, avoiding the cost of being moral (moral hypocrisy)? Do people initially intend to be moral, only to surrender this goal when the costs of being moral become clear (overpowered integrity)? We have found evidence of both moral hypocrisy and overpowered integrity. Each can lead ostensibly moral people to act immorally. These findings raise important questions for future research on the role of moral principles as guides to behavior.

Keywords

morality; integrity; hypocrisy; motivational conflict

Moral people often fail to act morally. One of the most important lessons to be learned from the tragically common atrocities of the past century—the endless procession of religious wars, mass killings, ethnic cleansings, terrorist bombings, and corporate coverups of product dangers—is that horrendous deeds are not done only by monsters. People who sincerely value morality can act in ways that seem to show a blatant disregard for the moral principles held dear. How is this possible?

Answers by psychologists tend to be of two types. Those who approach the problem from a developmental perspective are likely to blame a learning deficit: The moral principles must not have been learned well enough or in the right way. Those who approach the problem from a social-influence perspective are likely to blame situational pressures: Orders from a higher authority (Milgram, 1974) and pressure to conform (Asch, 1956) can lead one to set aside or disengage moral standards (Bandura, 1999).

There is truth in each of these explanations of moral failure. Yet neither, nor the two combined, is the whole truth. Even people who have well-internalized moral principles, and who are in relatively low-pressure situations, can fail to act morally. To understand how, one needs to consider the nature of moral motivation.

MORAL HYPOCRISY

It is often assumed that moral individuals want to be moral, to display *moral integrity*. But our research suggests that at least some individuals want to appear moral while, if possible, avoiding the cost of actually being moral. We call this motive *moral hypocrisy*.

To examine the nature of moral motivation, we have used a simple—but real—moral dilemma. The dilemma involves having research participants assign themselves and another participant (actually fictitious) to different tasks. One task is clearly more desirable; it has positive consequences (the chance to earn raffle tickets). The other task has neutral consequences (no chance to earn raffle tickets) and is described as rather dull and boring. Participants are told that the other participant will not know that they were allowed to assign the tasks;

the other participant will think the assignment was made by chance.

Most research participants faced with this simple situation assign themselves the positive-consequences task (70% to 80%, depending on the specific study), even though in retrospect very few (less than 10%) say that this was the moral thing to do. Their actions fail to fit their moral principles (Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997).

Adding a Salient Moral Standard . . . and a Coin

Other participants have been confronted with a slightly more complex situation. The written instructions that inform them of the opportunity to assign the tasks include a sentence designed to make the moral standard of fairness salient: "Most participants feel that giving both people an equal chance—by, for example, flipping a coin—is the fairest way to assign themselves and the other participant to the tasks." A coin is provided for participants to flip if they wish. Under these conditions, virtually all participants say in retrospect that either assigning the other participant the positive-consequences task or using a fair method such as the coin flip is the most moral thing to do. Yet only about half choose to flip the coin.

Of those who choose not to flip, most (80% to 90%, depending on the specific study) assign themselves to the positive-consequences task. More interesting and revealing, the same is true of those who flip the coin; most (85% to 90%) assign themselves the positive consequences. In study after study, the proportion who assign themselves the positive-consequences task after flipping the coin has been significantly greater than the 50% that would be expected by chance. This was true even in a study in which the coin was labeled "SELF to POS" on one side and "OTHER to

POS" on the other side. Clearly, some participants who flip the coin do not abide by the outcome. To appear fair by flipping the coin, yet still serve self-interest by ignoring the coin and assigning oneself the positive-consequences task, seems to be evidence of moral hypocrisy. Ironically, this hypocrisy pattern was especially strong among persons scoring high on a self-report measure of moral responsibility (Batson et al., 1997; Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999).

. . . And a Mirror

Other participants face an even more complex situation. After being provided the fairness standard and coin to flip, they assign the tasks while sitting in front of a mirror. The mirror is used to increase self-awareness and, thereby, pressure to reduce discrepancy between the moral standard of fairness and the task assignment (Wicklund, 1975). In a study that presented participants with this situation, exactly half of those who chose to flip the coin assigned themselves to the positive-consequences task. Apparently, having to face head-on the discrepancy between their avowed moral standard (be fair) and their standard-violating behavior (unfairly ignoring the result of the coin flip) was too much. In front of the mirror, those who wish to appear moral must be moral (Batson et al., 1999).

Taken together, the results of these studies seem to provide considerable evidence of moral hypocrisy. They conform precisely to the pattern we would expect if the goal of at least some research participants is to appear moral yet, if possible, avoid the cost of being moral. To the extent that moral hypocrisy is their motive, it is hardly surprising that ostensibly moral people fail to act morally. Any situational ambiguity that allows them to feign morality yet still serve self-interest—such as we provide by allowing par-

ticipants to flip the coin—will undermine moral action if their motive is moral hypocrisy.

OVERPOWERED INTEGRITY

Before concluding that the world is full of moral hypocrites, it is important to consider a quite different motivational explanation for the failure of participants in our studies to act morally. Perhaps at least some of those who flip the coin do so with a genuine intent to assign the tasks fairly. Their initial motive is to be moral (moral integrity). But when they discover that the flip has gone against them and their intent to be moral will cost them the positive-consequences task, conflict arises. Self-interest overpowers integrity, with the result that they appear moral by flipping the coin, yet still serve self-interest. The general idea of overpowered integrity is, then, that a person's motivation to be truly moral may be overpowered by stronger self-interested motives when being moral entails personal cost (as it often does). In the words of the oft-quoted biblical phrase, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26: 41).

Empirically Differentiating Moral Hypocrisy and Overpowered Integrity

How might one know which motivational process is operating, moral hypocrisy or overpowered integrity? The key difference between the two is the actor's intent when initially faced with a moral dilemma. In the former process, the initial motive is to appear moral yet avoid the cost of being moral; in the latter, the initial motive is to be moral. One factor that should clarify which of these motives is operating when people initially face a moral dilemma is whether they want to maintain control over

the outcome of an apparently moral way to resolve the dilemma.

In our task-assignment paradigm, research participants motivated by moral hypocrisy, who intend to give themselves the positive consequences yet also appear moral, should be reluctant to let someone else flip the coin. If a coin is to be flipped, it is important that they be the ones to do so because only then can they rig the outcome. In contrast, participants initially motivated to be moral, who genuinely want to assign the tasks fairly, should have no need to maintain control of the flip. It should make no difference who flips the coin; any fair-minded person will do.

Following this logic, we gave participants an additional decision option: They could allow the task assignment to be determined by the experimenter flipping a coin. Of participants who were faced with this situation (no mirror present) and used a coin flip, 80% chose to have the assignment determined by the experimenter's flip rather than their own. This pattern suggested that many participants' initial motive was moral integrity, not moral hypocrisy (Batson, Tsang, & Thompson, 2000).

Two further studies provided evidence that this integrity could be overpowered. In these studies, we increased the cost of being moral. Instead of being neutral, consequences of the less desirable task were negative. Participants were told that every incorrect response on the negative-consequences task would be punished with a mild but uncomfortable electric shock. Faced with the prospect of receiving shocks, only one fourth of the participants were willing to let the experimenter's flip determine the task assignment. Another fourth flipped the coin themselves; of these, 91% assigned themselves the positive-consequences task, indicating once again a biased coin flip. Almost all of the remaining one half showed

clear signs of overpowered integrity. They gave up any pretense of morality and assigned themselves the positive-consequences task without even feigning fairness. They were also quite ready, in retrospect, to admit that the way they assigned the tasks was not morally right.

Cost-Based Justification for Setting Morality Aside

How did these last participants deal with the clear discrepancy between their moral standards and their action? Comments made during debriefing suggest that many considered the relatively high personal cost introduced by the prospect of receiving electric shocks to be sufficient justification for not acting on their principles.

A cost-based justification for setting aside moral principles may seem quite understandable. After all, it is no surprise that participants do not want to receive electric shocks. But a cost-based justification carries ironic and chilling implications. Just think: If personal cost is sufficient to justify setting aside moral principles, then one can set aside morality when deciding whether to stand by or intervene as the perpetrators of hate crimes pursue their victims. One can set aside morality when considering one's own position of wealth while others are in poverty. One can set aside morality when considering whether to recycle newspaper or plastic containers or whether to contribute one's fair share to public television. Yet is it not in precisely such situations that moral principles are supposed to do their most important work as guides to behavior?

If, as is often assumed, the social role of morality is to keep individuals from placing their own interests ahead of the parallel interests of others, then cost-based justification poses a serious problem. A

principle that says, "Do not give your own interests priority . . . unless there is personal cost," is tantamount to having no real principle at all. It turns morality into a luxury item—something one might love to have but, given the cost, is content to do without.

CONCLUSION

We have considered the interplay of three different motives: First is self-interest. If the self has no clear stake in a situation, then moral principles are not needed to restrain partiality. Second is moral integrity, motivation to be moral as an end in itself. Third is moral hypocrisy, motivation to appear moral while, if possible, avoiding the cost of actually being moral. We have suggested two motivational explanations for the failure of ostensibly moral people to act morally: moral hypocrisy and overpowered integrity. The latter is the product of a conflict between self-interest and moral integrity: A person sincerely intends to act morally, but once the costs of being moral become clear, this initial intent is overpowered by self-interest. Our research indicates that both moral hypocrisy and overpowered integrity exist, and that each can lead moral people to act immorally. Moreover, our research indicates that the problem is not simply one of inconsistency between attitude and behavior—between saying and doing—produced by failure to think about relevant behavioral standards. Making relevant moral standards salient (e.g., by suggesting that a coin toss would be the fairest way to assign tasks) did little to increase moral behavior. The moral lapses we have observed are, we believe, best understood motivationally.

We have only begun to understand the nature of moral moti-

vation. There are persistent and perplexing questions still to be answered. For example, what socialization experiences stimulate moral integrity and hypocrisy, respectively? To what degree do parents preach the former but teach the latter? How might one structure social environments so that even those individuals motivated by moral hypocrisy or vulnerable to overpowered integrity might be led to act morally? Answers to such intriguing—and challenging—questions may help society avoid the atrocities of the past century in the next.

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Imaginative Suggestibility and Hypnotizability

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Abstract

More than a half-century of research aimed at identifying the predictors of hypnotic responding has been described as investigations of “hypnotizability.” Most of that research, however, has disregarded the well-established findings that (a) people respond to suggestion without being hypnotized almost as much as they do following a hypnotic induction, and (b) nonhypnotic and hypnotic suggestibility are highly correlated. More recent stud-

ies have provided the first empirical data on predictors of individual differences in response to the induction of hypnosis. These studies indicate that individual differences in hypnotic suggestibility can be accounted for completely by nonhypnotic suggestibility, expectancy, motivation, and reaction time. Because the amount of variance accounted for is as great as the reliability of the hypnotic-suggestibility scale, and because nonhypnotic suggestibility has been controlled, no

additional variables are necessary to account for hypnotic suggestibility.

Keywords

hypnosis; suggestibility; hypnotizability

Highly suggestible hypnotized subjects display and report automatic movements, partial paralyses, selective amnesia, insensitivity to painful stimulation, and hallucinations in all sensory modalities. These responses seem so astonishing that they have evoked two contrasting reactions. One is to doubt their veracity; the second is to assume that they must be due to a very unusual altered state, generally referred to as a hypnotic “trance.” But research indicates that neither of these conclusions is justified.

Hypnotized subjects are not merely putting on an act to impress