

## The Double-edged Sword of a Moral State of Mind

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History is replete with atrocities that were justified by invoking the highest principles and that were perpetrated upon victims who were equally convinced of their own moral principles. In the name of justice, of the common welfare, of universal ethics, and of God, millions of people have been killed and whole cultures destroyed. In recent history, concepts of universal rights, equality, freedom, and social equity have been used to justify every variety of murder including genocide. (Mischel & Mischel, 1976, p. 107)

The word “morality” generally refers to conceptions of right and wrong, good and bad, and the principles that define propriety and vice. Moral behavior is therefore motivated by conceptions of right and wrong, and seems **importantly** to be tied to promoting one’s conception of the good, and preventing or punishing perceived moral transgressions. Nevertheless, behavior and actions that some perceive as the height of moral virtue or sacrifice, others might see as an apex of depravity and evil. For example, most Americans were horrified by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. More than 78% of Americans surveyed shortly after the attacks believed the attackers were “evil to the core” (Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen, 2004). In contrast, a Gallup poll of nine Muslim countries (December 2001–January 2002) found that 67% percent of the respondents felt that the 9/11 attacks were morally justified (George, 2002). In short, morality can sometimes be a double-edged sword: depending on

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one's point of view, morally motivated behavior can be seen as the epitome of virtue or of evil.

One goal of morality research has been to gain a better understanding of the factors that make some people seemingly more moral, or more likely to act on their moral beliefs and principles, than others. Some researchers approach this problem by studying lay people's conceptions of moral excellence and the actual characteristics of people who might reasonably be called moral exemplars (e.g., people honored for exceptional bravery or caring, Walker & Frimer, 2007; Walker & Hennig, 2004). Other researchers study individual differences in morality by measuring the degree to which people rate normatively moral traits – such as fairness, friendliness, generosity, helpfulness, honesty, and kindness – as self-descriptive and desirable (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Reed & Aquino, 2003). Others take a less trait-based approach and argue that variation in moral behavior is primarily shaped by individual differences in the relative cognitive accessibility of moral constructs. Moral schemas, episodes, scripts, and prototypes may be more salient and “off the top of the head” for some people relative to others (i.e., some people may be high in moral chronicity); these differences, in turn, could shape the probability that people will act based on their moral beliefs (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004; Narvaez, Lapsley, Hagele, & Lasky, 2006). Regardless of their differences, the moral exemplar, identity, and chronicity approaches to understanding the role of morality in human affairs typically assume that people with stronger or more central moral identities should be more likely to act on their moral standards than those whose moral identities are less central and important to them (see also Blasi, 1983; 2004). Furthermore, each of these approaches is based on a number of implicit or explicit assumptions about the nature of morality. Specifically, these approaches typically assume that (a) there are stable individual differences in the tendency for one's thoughts, feelings, and behavior to be shaped by, or related to, moral impulses; (b) moral motivations primarily stem from a desire to behave consistently with one's sense of self or identity; and (c) moral identity and motivations primarily have prosocial and virtuous implications.

Our approach to the study of morality has stemmed from an interest in a different set of issues. Specifically, our research has grown from the notion that people's positions on abortion, gay marriage, physician-assisted suicide, and a host of other controversial issues of the day are sometimes imbued with concerns about first and basic principles of what is right and wrong, moral and immoral. Public discourse about these issues often revolves around heated debates about whether policymakers should be involved in

“legislating morality,” and authors have written tomes about a basic divide in public life, best described in terms of “moral politics” (Frank, 2004; Lakoff, 2002; Mooney, 2001). Moreover, there is a long list of examples of people feeling compelled to take extreme actions to promote their conceptions of morality, or to take a stand against perceived moral violations. For example, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Weatherman bombings in protest of the Vietnam War, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, the assassination of abortion providers in the United States, and the Chicago man who recently self-immolated to protest the Iraq War, are each examples of extreme actions that were based on very different ideological beliefs. Nonetheless, all of these examples are united by a common theme: The people who did these things appeared to be motivated by strong moral convictions.

These basic observations beg the question of whether there might be an important psychological difference between attitudes held with strong moral conviction and equally strong but nonmoral attitudes. By focusing on a different starting position – that is, whether moral conviction might be a special property of attitudes in general, and perhaps some political attitudes in particular – we have also worked from different implicit and explicit assumptions than those who have taken a more moral exemplar, identity, or chronicity approach to studying morality. In contrast to these other approaches, our research and theorizing has been guided by the following assumptions: (a) people experience moral convictions about attitude objects, but the attitude objects that trigger moral convictions vary idiosyncratically across persons and contexts; (b) although a desire to live up to internalized moral standards may form one foundation for morally motivated thoughts, feelings, and behavior, there are other theoretical possibilities worth exploring as well; and (c) although not *de facto* inconsistent with the notion that morality can have prosocial consequences, the moral conviction approach suggests that seeing issues in a moral light can have normatively antisocial consequences as well. For the purposes of this chapter, we will focus primarily on this last point. We first review an integrated theory of moral conviction that leads to predictions that morally motivated behavior will not always be associated with most people’s understanding of virtue. In fact, morality sometimes serves as the foundation for behavior (e.g., intolerance, vigilantism, violent political protests, or even terrorism) that third party observers are likely to normatively perceive as antisocial, if not patently immoral. We will then review specific empirical examples that support the predictions that moral convictions can have what seems to be a “dark side.” Finally, we end by discussing some of the practical and theoretical implications of our work for current theory and research on morality.

## AN INTEGRATED THEORY OF MORAL CONVICTION

Building on theories of moral philosophy and development, Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis (2005) recently proposed an integrated theory of moral conviction (ITMC) to explain why attitudes experienced as strong moral convictions (what we have called “moral mandates”) differ from otherwise strong but nonmoral attitudes. Among other things, Skitka and colleagues argued that people experience moral mandates as distinct from other types of attitudes. That is, people perceive moral mandates as *sui generis* – as immediately recognizable and being in a class of their own (Boyd, 1988; McDowell, 1979; Moore, 1903; Sturgeon, 1985). Moreover, people experience attitudes held with moral conviction as absolutes, or universal standards of truth, that others (if they too are moral) should also share. In other words, moral mandates appear often to have what the political satirist Colbert (2005) referred to as “truthiness,” that is, something one knows intuitively, instinctively, or “from the gut,” without reference to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or actual facts (see also Haidt, 2001). Although one could presumably arrive at moral convictions through either intuitive or reasoned processes, the “truthiness” characteristic of moral convictions seems to be a common experience, and suggestive that moral convictions more often reflect moral intuitions than careful reasoning (Hauser, Cushman, Young, Jin, & Mikhail, 2007). Furthermore, the “truthiness” of a position seems to be something one expects others to immediately recognize and share, or to be easily be persuaded to share as well, simply because one is so certain one is right.

Moreover, people experience moral mandates as beliefs about the world, or recognitions of fact, and at the same time as motivational guides. However, recognition of fact is generally independent of motivational force (Hume, 1888; see also Mackie, 1977; Smith, 1994, for detailed discussions). For example, recognition that  $2 + 2 = 4$  has no motivational corollary or mandate. In contrast, the recognition or judgment that physician-assisted suicide, gay marriage, or abortion is fundamentally moral or immoral has a motivational component and an action potential. In addition to the paradoxical feature of being simultaneously factual and motivational, moral convictions also provide their own inherent justification for responses or actions. Why must one act? – Because X is wrong! Because doing X is the right thing to do!

Furthermore, philosophical definitions of morality often include universality and generalizability as distinguishing features of moral as compared to nonmoral beliefs (Hare, 1981; Kant, 1947), and as part of what distinguishes moral convictions from personal tastes or normative conventions

(Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Turiel, 1983; 1998). Personal tastes, such as a simple preference that physician-assisted suicide be allowed or not be allowed, are by definition subjective. Other people are free to disagree or have alternative tastes or preferences. Other attitudes reflect normative conventions. For example, people might see physician-assisted suicide as wrong because it is against the law where they happen to live, but see it as perfectly acceptable in Oregon or Norway, where it is legally permissible. In contrast, a moral stance on physician-assisted suicide is one that is rooted in beliefs about moral truth – an absolute sense of right and wrong that transcends normative conventions, common practice, law, or cultural context. Because this feeling is a universal one, people are likely to think the practice is not only wrong in their own state, country, or cultural context, but is also wrong in other states, countries, or cultural contexts as well. For example, some Western activists vehemently object to the practice of female circumcision in Middle Eastern and African nations, where the practice is normative and culturally valued (Dorkenoo, 1994). Likewise, some consumers will boycott foreign goods when they learn that these goods are produced by child labor, even when there is no legal sanction against child labor in the countries where the goods are produced (Chowdhry & Beeman, 2001).

The ITMC also predicts that moral attitudes are likely to have different affective signatures than otherwise strong, but nonmoral, attitudes. What people experience when they think about issues that arouse a sense of moral conviction (e.g., female circumcision or child labor) has ties to different and potentially stronger emotions than people's equally strong, but nonmoral, attitudes (e.g., one's preference for Macintosh versus Windows operating systems) regardless of how strong their preferences may be. Although preferences may be equally strong, important, certain, and central to perceivers as their moral mandates, attitudes tied to moral conviction arouse quite different – and we think usually stronger – emotions than nonmorally mandated attitudes. Therefore, moral mandate effects might be a consequence of the emotions that are elicited when thinking about moral mandates relative to thinking about one's strong, but nonmoral attitudes.

Another distinction between moral and equally strong, but nonmoral, attitudes is that people perceive their moral convictions as authority independent (cf. Nucci, 2001; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Turiel, 1983, 1998). People may sometimes behave in ways that are perceived as “moral” because they respect and adhere to the rules in a given context, rather than because they have any real moral commitment to those rules. For example, someone's belief that it is wrong for a twenty-year-old to consume alcohol would be authority dependent if it were based on a desire to adhere to the rules and

legal norms of what constitutes underage drinking, or by a desire to avoid authority sanctions for breaking these rules. However, if the rules changed, so too would this person's view about the behavior. Someone whose view about this behavior was based on a sense of morality, however, would maintain their belief that the behavior was wrong even if the rules changed (e.g., if the legal drinking age changed to eighteen). In short, attitudes rooted in moral conviction are theoretically more authority independent than otherwise strong, but nonmoral attitudes (cf. Nucci, 2001; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Turiel, 1983, 1998).

The ITMC leads to a number of predictions, including ones that suggest that morally motivated behavior is not always likely to be perceived in terms of moral virtues. For example, the ITMC proposition that people experience moral convictions as absolutes suggests that people should be more intolerant of differences of opinion when their attitudes about a given issue are high, rather than low, in moral conviction. In a similar vein, the ITMC prediction that people are less willing to compromise their moral convictions than their otherwise strong but nonmoral attitudes suggests, ~~means~~ that people should find it more difficult to accept procedural solutions when they have moral mandates about decision outcomes (e.g., whether abortion should be legalized). Finally, when people have moral mandates about decision outcomes, they are likely to care more about whether the "correct" outcome is achieved, than whether it is achieved through fair procedures ~~or through the legitimacy of the authority who yields the decision~~. Finally, when authorities make decisions inconsistent with perceivers' moral mandates, people's trust in authority, and therefore their willingness to obey other unrelated rules or laws, may erode. We briefly review research in support of each of these predictions of the ITMC below.

### Intolerance

One implication of the ITMC is that tolerance of differing points of view has little or no room at the table when moral convictions are at stake: right is right and wrong is wrong. Consistent with this idea, some of our research indicates that people do not want to work with, live near, or even shop at a store owned by someone who does not share their morally mandated opinions. For example, we asked a community sample of adults ( $N = 91$ , who ranged in age from 19 to 81) to nominate what they thought was the most pressing problem facing the nation (Skitka et al., 2005; Study 1). Participants then rated how strongly they felt about their nominated issue, using traditional indices of attitude strength (i.e., attitude extremity, importance,

and certainty, see Petty & Krosnick, 1995, for a more detailed discussion of attitude strength), and indicated the degree to which their feelings about the issue were held as a moral conviction<sup>1</sup>. Finally, participants indicated how happy they would feel to have someone who did not share their view on their nominated issue as a neighbor, as someone who might marry into their family, someone they might work with, or other possible social relationships (a measure of social distance and prejudice; see Byrnes & Kiger, 1988; Crandall, 1991).

Our results indicated that the strength of moral conviction people felt about their nominated issue explained unique variance in their preferred social distance from attitudinally dissimilar others. This result held even when controlling for indices of attitude strength. Specifically, when moral conviction was high, participants were equally likely to be intolerant of attitudinally dissimilar others, regardless of whether the prospective role was intimate (e.g., friend) or more distant (e.g., the owner of a store one might frequent). In contrast, when moral conviction was low, people were quite tolerant of attitude dissimilarity, especially in more distant than intimate relationships (Skitka et al., 2005, Study 1). Moreover, these same findings emerged in a second study that tested the same hypotheses using researcher nominated issues in another community sample of adults ( $N = 82$ , age ranged from 18 to 77; e.g., legalization of marijuana, abortion, capital punishment, and building new nuclear power plants in the United States), and when controlling for the tendency to see all issues – not just a specific issue – as related to moral convictions.

To further test the ties between moral conviction and intolerance, we used a behavioral measure to test whether participants (a college student sample,  $N = 80$ ) were more likely to physically distance themselves from attitudinally dissimilar others when dissimilarity was associated with high moral conviction (Skitka et al., 2005, Study 3). Before the experimental session, we assessed participants' degree of attitude strength and moral conviction

<sup>1</sup> We conceive of moral mandates as attitudes held with strong moral conviction. To avoid potentially confounding moral conviction measures with structural indices of attitude strength, we generally operationalize moral conviction in terms of responses to a single face-valid item, "To what extent are your feelings about X a reflection of your core moral values and convictions?" (on a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *very much*) or responses to a 7-point agree-disagree item, "My feelings about X are deeply rooted in my core moral values and convictions." We have also used these items in conjunction with another face-valid item, "To what extent are your feelings about X deeply connected to your beliefs about 'right' and 'wrong'?" A discussion of the construct and discriminant validity of this operationalization of moral conviction is provided in Skitka and Bauman (2008).

associated with their position on abortion. Later, participants came to the lab for a study that was ostensibly about how people get to know each other and whether this process unfolds differently when one person has “inside knowledge” about an unfamiliar counterpart. All research participants learned that they would be meeting another research participant and would engage in a brief get-to-know you exercise. Participants also learned that they had been randomly selected to be the informed discussion partner and that the person they were about to meet was strongly pro-choice on the issue of abortion. After this introduction, the experimenter escorted the participant to another room. A variety of personal effects implied that someone else had taken the one available chair but had stepped out of the room. The experimenter feigned surprise at the missing “other participant,” suggested that the real participant grab another chair from a stack against the wall, and then left the room to ostensibly look for the other participant. After waiting enough time for the real participant to be settled, the experimenter returned and measured how far the real participant had placed his or her chair from the chair that would ostensibly be occupied by the pro-choice student.

As in the social distance studies described earlier, results indicated that people’s strength of moral conviction associated with the issue of abortion explained unique variance in the physical distance people maintained between themselves and a pro-choice target, an effect that was significant even when we controlled for a variety of other indices of attitude strength. People who morally opposed abortion maintained greater distance from the other chair than those whose opposition was not as strongly morally mandated. In contrast, people who morally supported legalized abortion sat closer to the other chair than those who were not as morally mandated. Other results indicated that people were more repulsed by moral dissimilarity than they were attracted to moral similarity.

Another way to test the intolerance hypothesis is to explore whether people are more intolerant of moral than other kinds of diversity. Although few studies have explored people’s tolerance of moral diversity, there is scattered evidence consistent with the prediction that people respond more negatively to moral than nonmoral forms of diversity. For example, Rokeach and Mezei (1966) found that White and Black participants preferred to spend their coffee breaks with discussion group members (confederates) who shared their beliefs but not their race, more than with members who shared their race but not their beliefs. Interestingly, this result emerged during a period when race relations presumably were much more tense than they are today (see also Anderson & Cote, 1966). Recent research arrives at similar

conclusions. Fraternity members, for example, valued diversity in socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and religion in their membership more than diversity of opinion on moral politics (Haidt et al., 2003, Study 1). Additional comparisons of men, women, Whites, Blacks, and Asian students each revealed a similar order of preferences for working with diverse others: All groups were happy to interact with demographically diverse others, but were reluctant to work with morally dissimilar others (Haidt et al., 2003, Studies 2 and 3). Taken together, moral diversity appears to be a more difficult interpersonal challenge than various forms of demographic diversity.

In summary, research indicates that as people's moral convictions in a given attitude domain increases, so too does their intolerance for attitudinal dissimilarity in that domain. People do not want to live near, be friends with, or even shop at a store owned by someone who does not share their moral point of view. People also act on their feelings of intolerance: strength of moral conviction associated with a given issue uniquely predicts increased distance in how far people will sit from someone with an opposing position on that issue. Finally, although people see value in many kinds of diversity, they explicitly dislike diversity of moral opinion.

### Conflict Management

In addition to evidence that people dislike or are intolerant of people whose moral convictions differ from their own, moral diversity is also associated with greater personal and intra-organizational conflict than other kinds of diversity. For example, a study by Jehn, Northcraft and Neale (1999) provided evidence consistent with the notion that value diversity presents unique interpersonal challenges. Jehn et al. found that value diversity correlated more strongly than social category (e.g., ethnicity or gender) or informational diversity of workgroups (e.g., the degree to which people had varying levels of information or expertise) with all forms of conflict at work. These conflicts ranged from personality differences to task-related difficulties, such as disagreements about who should do what, or the best way to accomplish work-related tasks. In other words, as value diversity in a given workgroup increased, so did levels of all forms of workplace conflict. In addition to associations with greater conflict, higher levels of value diversity in workgroups were associated with lower levels of performance and efficiency (Jehn et al., 1999).

Although the Jehn et al. (1999) study is consistent with the notion that moral diversity presents challenges to conflict resolution, not all values are connected to people's conceptions of morality. Recent research directly

tested whether the Jehn et al.'s (1999) findings were really due to something specific about, and unique to, moral diversity. Specifically, Skitka et al. (2005, Study 4) examined people's behavior in small, attitudinally heterogeneous groups. In a pre-screening process, participants (college students,  $N=242$  individuals and 86 groups) indicated whether their attitudes on the issues of abortion or capital punishment were held with strong moral conviction. To be eligible to participate in the study, prospective participants had to have strong moral convictions about one, but not both, of these issues. In an additional condition of the experiment, participants had to have an extreme attitude, but low moral conviction about whether there should be mandatory testing as a graduation requirement.<sup>2</sup> Based on their responses on the pre-screening measure, we invited four participants with heterogeneous<sup>3</sup> attitudes to come to the lab, that is, we invited two participants who held beliefs on one side of an issue and two participants who held beliefs on the other side of that issue. Participants were not aware of anything about the other group members' attitudes, nor about the criteria used for group composition.

Upon arrival at the lab, groups were charged with the task of developing a procedure that could be used to resolve their assigned issue. Some groups were assigned to develop a procedure to resolve a morally mandated issue (e.g., group members who had moral mandates about abortion were asked to discuss procedures to decide once and for all whether abortion should be legal in the United States). Other groups were asked to develop a procedure to resolve a nonmorally mandated issue (e.g., group members with moral mandates about abortion were asked to discuss procedures to decide once and for all whether capital punishment should be legal in the United States). Still other groups were asked to develop procedures to resolve an issue about which they had strong but nonmoral attitudes (e.g., group members had moral convictions about either abortion or capital punishment and were asked to discuss procedures to decide once and for all whether there should be mandatory testing as a graduation requirement). Groups learned that discussion could end when they either (a) came to unanimous agreement

<sup>2</sup> These issues were selected based on pilot testing that indicated that the abortion and capital punishment attitudes were sufficiently uncorrelated, so that we could identify people with a moral mandate on one but not the other issue, and because about equal proportions of our subject pool supported or opposed these issues. Similar pilot testing indicated that mandatory testing as a graduation requirement was an issue that students in our subject pool felt strongly about on both sides, but was not an issue they tended to see in a moral light.

<sup>3</sup> Other conditions of the study also investigated problem solving in groups that were homogeneous in attitude composition. See Skitka et al. (2005, Study 4) for more detail.

about a procedure to resolve their assigned issue, (b) came to unanimous agreement that they would never agree on a procedure to resolve their assigned issue, or (c) they timed out before coming to unanimous consensus. This admittedly very complicated experiment allowed us to test several important nuances, including whether there was something special about the effects of diversity of moral beliefs about a specific issue that could not be reduced to something about the kinds of people who have moral convictions, or something about attitude strength rather than moral conviction.

Results indicated that group processes and climate were different in morally convicted heterogeneous groups that discussed procedures to resolve their morally convicted issue, than they were in all of the other group discussion conditions. Compared to other group configurations, heterogeneous groups that discussed procedures to resolve their morally convicted issue were (a) least likely to unanimously agree to a procedural solution to their assigned problem, (b) lowest in reported goodwill and cooperativeness toward their fellow group members, and (c) seen as more defensive and tense by third party observers who were blind to the experimental conditions. By way of contrast, the groups who discussed procedures to resolve something they felt strongly but not morally about reported the greatest degree of cooperation and goodwill, and were also seen by third party observers as the least tense and defensive of all the groups. In summary, trying to develop procedural solutions to resolve diversity of moral opinions was difficult, awkward, and painful, whereas trying to develop procedural solutions to resolve diversity of strong but nonmoral opinions was experienced as interesting and even fun (Skitka et al., 2005, Study 4). The contrast between the moral mandate and strong attitude conditions therefore provides quite persuasive evidence that there is something uniquely challenging about trying to resolve moral conflict.

Importantly, the results of the group study indicated that conflict and difficulty in developing procedural solutions for issues emerged even when participants were blind to one another's attitudes and strength of moral convictions. In addition, moral diversity in groups did not impede developing procedures to resolve nonmoral problems or disagreements, at least in the one-time group encounter studied by Skitka et al. (2005, Study 4). Future research is needed, however, to explore what happens when people are aware of the diversity of moral opinions in their workgroup when they are working to resolve nonmoral conflicts. For example, people who work together for longer periods are likely to be aware of areas of moral disagreement. In turn, this knowledge could affect how they perceive one another as well as their expectations about whether they can effectively resolve

unrelated conflicts. In short, a remaining empirical question is whether people who disagree about fundamental issues of right and wrong assume that they are unlikely to agree about nonmoral issues or questions as well.

One might also hope that older adults might do better than the student sample did in the Skitka et al. (2005) conflict resolution exercise, and that life experience and interpersonal skills may provide people with greater skill at managing moral conflicts. That said, the Jehn et al. (1999) study found similar results with samples of adult workers, and much of our other research has been conducted with nationally representative samples of adults. We have found considerable evidence that adults – regardless of age – distrust and reject procedural solutions to conflict when they have a strong moral stake in decision outcomes (Skitka, 2006; Skitka & Mullen, 2002), research we will describe in further detail shortly.

In summary, research indicates that people have more difficulty resolving conflicts about issues when their feelings about the conflict are based on strong, rather than weak, moral convictions. Moreover, these effects appear to be something special about moral conviction, rather than simply how strongly people feel about the issue, individual differences in the tendency to have strong moral convictions about issues, or the age of those studied.

### Authority Independence

Another frequently used strategy to resolve differences is appealing to legitimate authorities for resolving conflict. Previous research suggests that people obey and accept the decisions made by procedurally fair and legitimate authorities (see Tyler, 2006, for a review). However, few if any studies until recently tested whether this finding was true when authorities made decisions that were explicitly at odds with people's moral convictions. In other words, few studies had explored whether people have distinct psychological experiences when they believe that authorities have made immoral decisions. It is one thing to accept nonpreferred outcomes, but may be an entirely different thing to accept and comply with decisions that one sees as fundamentally wrong or immoral.

A number of recent studies have explored whether moral conviction about decision outcomes acted as a boundary condition on the general effects of authority legitimacy and procedural fairness on people's willingness to accept nonpreferred decision outcomes, something predicted by the authority independence hypothesis. For example, Skitka (2006) used a longitudinal panel design to test the effects of people's moral convictions about decision outcomes in the context of the U.S. Supreme Court decision

in *Gonzales v. Oregon* (a Bush administration challenge to Oregon's Death with Dignity Act, a state law that legalized physician-assisted suicide under some circumstances in Oregon). Judgments of procedural fairness, trust, and legitimacy of the U.S. Supreme Court, as well as people's moral convictions about the issue of physician-assisted suicide, were collected from a large nationally representative sample of adults before the Supreme Court heard arguments about this case. Months later, when the Court announced its decision in the case (it ruled against the Bush administration, and upheld the Oregon law), the same people were surveyed again. A total of  $N=731$  adults completed both surveys (whose ages ranged from 19 to 90,  $M=45.94$ ,  $SD=16.24$ ) and therefore constituted the analytic sample for hypothesis testing.

Even when controlling for a host of other variables (e.g., age, political orientation, religiosity), results indicated that the vast proportion of variance in perceptions of outcome fairness and decision acceptance of the Court ruling was explained by the joint effects of decision valence and moral conviction. Compared to those with weak moral convictions about physician-assisted suicide, people with morally mandated outcome preferences were more likely to reject the decision and see it as unfair if it was inconsistent with their outcome preferences. Surprisingly, people's pre-decision perceptions of the Court's procedural fairness, trustworthiness, and legitimacy explained no variance in post-decision perceptions of fairness and decision acceptance.

Moreover, the degree to which perceivers felt stronger moral convictions about their preferred outcome of the case also affected post-decision perceptions of the procedural fairness, trust, and legitimacy of the Court. People with stronger moral convictions against physician-assisted suicide perceived the Supreme Court to be less procedurally fair, trustworthy, and legitimate after the ruling than before its decision. In contrast, people with stronger moral convictions in support of physician-assisted suicide perceived the Supreme Court to be more procedurally fair, trustworthy, and legitimate, than before (Skitka, 2006). Both of these latter effects held regardless of whether participants' perception of the Supreme Court was positive or negative before the *Gonzales v. Oregon* decision. In summary, perceptions of procedural fairness, institutional legitimacy, and related variables assessed before the Court ruling did not protect authorities from backlash when people morally disagreed with the authority's decision; instead, people's reactions to both the Court's decision and the Court itself were shaped primarily by whether the decision was consistent with their *a priori* moral preferences.

Similar support for the ITMC's authority independence proposition comes from a longitudinal study of people's perceptions of the widely publicized Elián González custody battle (Skitka & Mullen, 2002). In November of 1999, five-year-old Elián González, his mother, and 12 others unsuccessfully attempted to cross from Cuba to the United States. Their boat capsized, and Elián's mother and most of the others drowned. Elián was rescued and placed in the temporary care of Miami relatives who in turn filed a petition to grant Elián political asylum in the U.S., despite Elián's father's request that Elián be returned to him to Cuba. After months of court decisions and appeals, armed Federal agents took Elián by force from his Miami relatives' home and returned Elián to his father in Cuba.

Skitka and Mullen (2002) conducted a natural experiment by collecting data from a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults ( $N=626$ , whose ages ranged from 18 to 86,  $M=41.33$ ,  $SD=14.96$ ) to assess public reactions as the case unfolded. Judgments were collected several weeks before the Federal raid, immediately after the raid, and immediately after Elián returned to Cuba. Results of the study were consistent with the notion that when people have moral convictions about decision outcomes, they care more about whether these outcomes are achieved than they do about cooperating with legitimate and procedurally fair authorities. For example, 83% percent of people with a moral mandate made at least one critical comment about the U.S. government, compared with only 12% of those without a moral mandate about how the case should be resolved. Analyses of open-ended comments about the case indicated that people who morally supported Elián's U.S. asylum criticized specific authorities (e.g., the INS, U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno) and the decision to use force to remove Elián from his relatives' home. In contrast, people who thought the only moral solution was to return Elián to Cuba and his father criticized authorities for taking too long to act, even though they accepted the final decision and perceived it to be fair in the end.

Analysis of closed-ended questions about people's reactions to the case also supported the prediction that perceptions of fairness and outcome acceptance would depend on whether outcomes were consistent with perceivers' *a priori* moral convictions about the case. Specifically, decision acceptance and perceptions of fairness were primarily predicted by whether authorities acted in ways that supported people's moral mandates about whether Elián should stay in the United States or be returned to Cuba. Pre-resolution perceptions of the procedural fairness of involved authorities, by comparison, had no effects on people's post-resolution fairness judgments or willingness to accept the resolution as the final word on

the issue. In summary, the Elián study supported the hypothesis that when people have morally mandated outcome preferences, their judgments are shaped more by whether authorities yield the “correct” outcome, than by anything about the authorities’ legitimacy or fairness.

Controlled laboratory studies also support the authority independence hypothesis. For example, Skitka and Houston (2001, Study 2) presented student participants ( $N = 123$ ) with hypothetical news reports that indicated whether a defendant in a capital murder case appeared to be truly guilty or innocent, and whether the defendant was executed by the state following a fair trial or killed by a vigilante before the trial began. Results indicated that people perceived the death of a guilty defendant to be equally fair, regardless of whether it was the product of a full trial and meted by the state or was an act of vigilantism. Consistent with the authority independence hypothesis, what mattered most to people’s perceptions of outcome fairness was whether they perceived the outcome in the case – i.e., that the defendant was punished – was morally right if he was thought to be guilty, or morally wrong if he was thought to be innocent. In contrast, when defendant guilt was ambiguous (in short, when people did not have a moral mandate about whether the defendant should be punished or set free), perceptions of outcome fairness were consistent with the predictions of procedural justice theories: punishment of the ambiguously guilty defendant was seen as unfair if it was a consequence of vigilantism, and fair if it was a consequence of due process (Skitka & Houston, 2001, Study 1b).

Finally, other research has found behavioral support for the prediction that people reject authorities and the rule of law when outcomes violated their moral convictions. Specifically, when people were exposed to unjust laws, they were more likely to report intentions to flout other unrelated laws in the future (Nadler, 2005), presumably because their faith in the system had been eroded. Mullen and Nadler (*in press*) further tested the flouting hypothesis in an experiment that involved exposing people to legal decisions that supported, opposed, or were unrelated to participants’ moral convictions. The experimenters distributed a pen with a post-exposure questionnaire, and asked participants to return the questionnaire and pen at end of the experimental session. Consistent with the notion that decisions, rules, and laws that violate people’s moral convictions erode perceptions of the legitimacy of authority systems, participants were more likely to steal the pen after exposure to a legal decision that violated rather than supported their personal moral convictions. In summary, people’s reactions to laws that violated their moral convictions generalized and affected their willingness to comply with completely unrelated laws and norms of moral conduct.

### Conclusions and Implications

Most morality research has focused on the psychological antecedents and consequences of virtue. However, the ways in which people's moral concerns play out in everyday social interaction may not always have implications that are normatively perceived as virtuous. For example, the research reviewed in this chapter reveals that stronger moral convictions about specific issues are associated with (a) intolerance of differences in opinion about those issues; (b) difficulties resolving conflict about these issues; (c) acceptance and endorsement of any means that yield morally "correct" ends, including vigilantism; (d) active disobedience of laws and authority dictates if they conflict with one's position on these issues and (e) increased flouting of even unrelated laws or codes of conduct when moral mandates have been violated. Although morality research has commonly focused on virtue, each of these findings suggest that morality is a double-edged sword, capable of contributing to behavior that can easily be construed as anything but moral. Although primarily associated with prosocial and positive consequences, people's moral convictions, motives, and sentiments are sometimes associated with negative and antisocial consequences as well.

Moreover, we can be relatively confident about the generalizability of the phenomena reviewed here. Results in support of the conclusions made here have replicated across a variety of different methodological approaches (laboratory experiments and field studies), samples (students, community, and nationally representative samples of adults), and across a host of issues. Furthermore, the effects of moral conviction on various judgments, decisions, and behaviors emerges even when controlling for a host of alternative explanations for effects, including demographics (e.g., age, political orientation); various measures of attitude strength (e.g., attitude extremity, importance, and certainty); as well as measures that attempt to capture potential individual differences in moral rigidity (e.g., dogmatism, or various measures of a tendency to see all issues as moralized).

Although the moral mandate program of research has demonstrated the value of studying moral conviction as a unique characteristic of attitudes, there is considerable room for additional research. To a considerable degree, research to date has focused primarily on (a) the question of whether moral convictions yield new insights and variance explained in behavior that could not be accounted for by other well-known aspects of attitudes, such as their strength, importance, and so on; and (b) ruling out a number of other alternative explanations for findings associated with moral conviction (see Skitka et al., 2005; Skitka & Bauman, 2008). There is no end,

in principle, to the search for nonmoral properties of attitudes that could explain away the effects of morality. For example, one could argue that perhaps moral conviction effects reduce to the absence of ambivalence, or are due instead to various forms of moral immaturity. Like all researchers, we can make only limited claims based on the research conducted thus far. That said, existing research suggests that moral mandates do not reduce to some combination of nonmoral content and structural attributes of attitudes (such as extremity, importance, etc.), or to various individual difference variables (e.g., a tendency to see all issues in a moral light). It will be interesting to test hypotheses about how and why moral mandates have the effects they do; however, further attempts at reductionism would seem to be relatively low on the list of interesting possible avenues for future research. Much more interesting areas for future research will be to explore not only the consequences of having strong moral convictions, but the antecedents of moral conviction as well. For example, how do people recognize when their feelings about an attitude says something about their moral convictions, rather than something about their strong, but nonmoral, preferences or senses of convention? Perhaps surprisingly, people who take very different sides on issues of the day are often equally likely to report that their positions on these issues are held with strong moral convictions (Skitka & Bauman, 2008). How is it that people tend to identify the same issues as ones they hold with strong moral convictions (e.g., abortion, gay marriage, and the Iraq War), but they nonetheless take very different sides or positions on these same issues? How easy or difficult is it to get people to moralize their position on a given issue, and how does one go about moralizing it? Of equal importance, how easy or difficult is it to get people to de-moralize their position on an issue, and how does one go about accomplishing this end?

In conclusion, in addition to revealing that morality has potentially negative in addition to positive implications for interpersonal interaction, conflict resolution, deference to authorities, and social cohesion, the moral mandate program of research also points to psychological factors that may be important to study to gain a full understanding of when and why morality motivates human behavior. Specifically, in addition to studying individual differences in moral identity or character, our theory suggests it is also important to study the psychology that leads people to identify some attitudes and feelings as morally motivated. Although our theory tends to emphasize studying the antecedents and consequences of attitudes held with strong versus weak moral conviction (i.e., an emphasis on attitudinal differences, rather than on individual differences), to the extent that

theorists or researchers remain primarily interested in individual differences in moral identity and character, our theory and research also suggests that it is as important to study the possibility that increasing the strength of moral identity, character, or chronicity may have negative, in addition to positive, consequences.

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