

MORAL SELF-REGULATION

Licensing and Compensation

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People navigate moral choices on a daily basis. A day's choice might begin when a coffee barista inadvertently returns too much change, continue with noticing (while comfortably seated) a senior citizen standing on the crowded bus at the beginning of the long ride to work, and escalate to being asked to stretch the truth to cover for a tardy colleague. Despite the diversity of circumstances such as these, past moral choice can affect current choices, which then influence future choices. For example, a customer who silently pockets the extra coffee change may subsequently be more inclined to give up his seat to the senior citizen; this altruistic act may later license lying for his late co-worker.

However, examining people's decisions within the context of their recent behavioral history is largely absent in existing theories of ethical decision making, which tend to take a singular, episodic approach to explaining moral behavior. The moral development model (Kohlberg, 1981), for instance, suggests that moral behavior is determined by the sophistication (or stage) of a person's moral reasoning. Although individuals who have reached advanced stages may occasionally reason at a lower stage, the central tenet of Kohlberg's model is that people at more developed stages make superior moral decisions than those at earlier stages (Gibbs, Basinger, & Fuller, 1992; Rest & Navarez, 1994). Thus, Kohlberg's model predicts consistency in moral behavior over time.

Other studies focus on situational variations in addition to moral characteristics or traits. Rest (1986), for example, divides ethical decision making into four discrete steps—awareness, judgment, intention, and behavior and the success of one stage does not imply the success of subsequent stages. A decision maker may possess moral judgment but fail to establish moral intent, hence failing to engage in ethical behavior. Thus, behavioral discrepancies may be caused by situational factors such as job context, incentive structures, organizational culture (Ferrell, Gresham, & Fraedrich, 1989; Treviño, 1986), or social norms (De Cremer & van Dijk, 2008); others may stem from individual differences in moral engagement (see Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Additionally, good people sometimes engage in morally questionable acts simply because they do not recognize the moral implications of their actions (Bazerman & Moore, 2008; Jones, 1991; Murnighan, Cantelon, & Elyashiv, 2001). These extensions provide important qualifications to the correspondence between moral characteristics and moral behavior by recognizing the moderating role of the situation in determining behavior. Each of these approaches acknowledges that individuals with certain moral characteristics may not behave consistently across different situations; however, they attribute inconsistencies to exogenous factors such as situational constraints rather than to the influence of the individual's previous choices. From these perspectives, moral behaviors are examined outside the temporal context of one's behavioral history.

Contrary to the above positions, we consider an individual's behavioral history and how prior decisions affect subsequent choices. Prior decisions influence which attributes are highlighted in subsequent choices, how they are weighted, and which option is ultimately chosen (e.g., Dhar & Simonson, 1992; Drolet, 2002; Simonson & Tversky, 1992). Many studies have shown that how options are "bracketed" highlights concerns not salient when considering choices in isolation (for review, see: Read, Loewenstein, & Rabin, 1999). For example, Simonson (1990) asked participants to choose between audio tracks for listening; participants tended to

choose low-variety sets when picking the next song after the current song ended. However, participants were more inclined to choose high-variety sets when making all song choices up front, demonstrating a difference between sequential vs. simultaneous choice. Dhar and Simonson (1999) argue that consumers try to "balance" their choices. For example, people usually prefer an inexpensive cigar before a meal and an expensive cigar afterwards, because ending a meal with an expensive cigar is consistent with a preference for improvement (Ross & Simonson, 1991; Loewenstein & Prelec, 1993). If people have smoked an expensive cigar prior to a meal, they will opt for an inexpensive one afterwards to balance against their previous choice (Dhar & Simonson, 1999).

People seek balance in ethical decisions as well. Khan and Dhar (2006) found that people donated less money to charity if they had previously committed to help a foreign student in the future. Similarly, Monin and Miller showed that past virtuous behaviors licensed questionable actions (2001). Monin and Miller asked participants to make two consecutive hiring decisions. The first required participants to choose among five applicants for a position in a large consulting firm: In one condition, a man was the obviously superior applicant, whereas in the other, a woman was clearly the better choice. Most chose the strongest applicant, regardless of gender. The second hiring decision required participants to choose a candidate for a stereotypically male job (e.g., foreman). Interestingly, the first decision influenced the second, even though participants saw no connection between them: They were more likely to favor a male applicant in the second decision if they had picked a woman in the first hiring decision. The authors argue that the act of choosing a female applicant in the first task (thereby establishing "moral credentials") buffered participants from worries about appearing sexist in the second task and, hence, licensed their prejudicial decision.

This type of "moral bracketing" highlights the importance of considering behavioral histories to understand how people regulate their moral choices. The previously discussed studies by Khan and Dhar (2006) and Monin and Miller (2001) examined contexts in which sequential behaviors occurred in the same domain (i.e., both decisions related to either helping behavior or prejudice). In this chapter, we place ethical decision making in the context of one's behavioral history but do so regardless of whether the behaviors reside in the same domain. Based on moral-identity theory and the self-regulatory view of self-knowledge, we break down moral regulation into two distinct mechanisms—moral licensing and moral compensation. We introduce the process of moral self-regulation, followed by a review of research that reveals licensing and compensation phenomena,

and conclude with the implications for future research of an “equilibrium” approach to moral decision-making.

MORAL SELF-REGULATION

Although individuals differ in the extent to which morality is central to their self-concept, most people see themselves as more ethical than others (Tenbrunsel, 1998; Zhong & Liljenquist, 2008). Individuals tend to conclude that self-interested outcomes are not only desirable but morally justifiable (Epley & Caruso, 2004). For example, people who were randomly assigned to the role of plaintiff or defendant in a hypothetical court case differed in their perceptions of a fair settlement by nearly \$18,000 in a self-serving direction (Loewenstein, Issacharoff, Camerer, & Babcock, 1993). Furthermore, the process of justifying self-serving outcomes does not necessarily require conscious attention or cognitive effort (Epley & Caruso, 2004).

The desired “moral self” not only motivates goal achievement, but also serves as a reference point against which discrepancies between the desired self and the actual self can be monitored or evaluated (Higgins, 1996). Thus, people may ask themselves, “Am I a moral person?” and attempt to answer that question by comparing their actual behavior to their moral ideals, motivating a bolstering of the self (compensation) when their actual behavior compares poorly, or allowing them to slack off in the moral domain (licensing) when their actual behavior compares well.

People tend to experience emotional distress when they conclude that they are not living up to their moral aspirations (Higgins, 1987) and are more likely to engage in moral behaviors to compensate for their inadequacies to rebalance the moral scale. Whether from a more subjective transgression such as lying (Shaffer, 1975) or their guilt stems from a clear moral transgression such as delivering excessively harsh criticism (Noel, 1973), few can escape their consciences, which prick long after the crime was committed (Ring, Wallston, & Corey, 1970). In particular, guilt lingers longest when individuals cannot blame their behavior on external incentives (Carlsmith, Collins, & Helmreich, 1966) or situational constraints (Calder, Ross, & Insko, 1973). Of course, guilt may not always translate into compensatory behaviors since individuals may distort their perceptions and rationalize that what they have done was not so morally wrong (Bandura et al., 1996).

On the other hand, some may decide that their actual selves have matched or even exceeded their ideal selves. This can reverse the compensatory mechanism, producing a sense of entitlement to some moral laxity. Supportive of this, the implicit-goal-priming literature (Forster, Liberman, & Higgins, 2005) has shown that once a goal has been reached, activation of goal-related constructs wanes. Therefore, individuals who have validated

or exceeded their ideal moral selves may experience a respite from moral regulatory forces and take ethical liberties in subsequent situations.

The motivational force of moral regulation could be compared to a rubber band. When self-perception deviates from the ideal moral image, the band is stretched and produces the greatest motivational force. This force causes people to refrain from further transgressing the bounds of the moral self. However, when self-perception matches or exceeds the moral self, the band “relaxes,” exerting less restraint on moral choice and licensing immoral behavior until it is stretched to a point where moral deviations signaling a new threat to the self, and the compensatory mechanism is once again activated (see also Zhong, Ku, Lount, & Murnighan, 2008). With moral compensation and moral licensing, it is not enough to know a person’s moral identity, moral reasoning, or situational variables to predict moral behavior. What people do is inevitably affected by their current “moral tension.” If there is sufficient slack in the moral band, ethically questionable choices are more likely to be made. What people have done in the past affects how much “room” their moral behavior will have in the future. Thus, we must consider people’s behavioral histories to understand the influences on their ethical decisions and the complex processes that allow seemingly “good” people to make unsavory choices yet still emerge with their sense of morality intact.*

Moral Compensation

Unethical acts pose direct threats to one’s moral self, and the emotional repercussions are both uncomfortable and enduring (Cialdini, Darby, & Vincent, 1973; Klass, 1978). As individuals seek to escape moral self-censure, the negative emotions spawned by transgression motivates protective cognitions and behaviors (Bandura et al., 1996). For example, Klass (1978) noted that, although individuals are emotionally plagued by unethical choices, there is no evidence that their overall self-worth suffers as a result. The resilience of self-esteem in the face of transgressions is arguably due to the great lengths taken, consciously and unconsciously, to protect one’s moral image.

Much research on how people respond to immoral behavior focuses on cognitive distortion and rationalization, which spare transgressors self-sanction by allowing them to disengage morally from behaviors that threaten their self-esteem. Bandura et al. (1996) examined various forms of moral disengagement in children who had misbehaved, such as diffusion of responsibility, dehumanizing the victim, moral justification, euphemistic relabeling, and advantageous comparisons. Exploring the potency of moral justification and advantageous comparisons, Sagarin, Rhoads, and Cialdini (1998) found that individuals who tell damaging lies employ “an

ego-protective false consensus mechanism . . . a normalizing belief in others' dishonesty." By derogating the target's integrity, participants in their study were able to simultaneously normalize their own unscrupulous behavior and generate a less-threatening social comparison. In an investigation of moral disengagement in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack, McAlister, Bandura, and Owen (2006) noted the prevalence of euphemistic relabeling in the military, citing phrases such as "servicing the target" (bombing missions) or "collateral damage" (unintended civilian deaths).

However, distortions and euphemisms can only do so much to shield against moral scrutiny; when individuals can no longer squelch a threat to their moral identity, direct restitution is an obvious option for absolution. Liars can confess their deception; thieves can return stolen goods. For example, feminists who were induced to display anti-feminist behaviors in a gender-role stereotyping task were more likely subsequently to assert their feminist beliefs (Sherman & Gorkin, 1980). In another example, Ramana-than and Williams (2007) examined penance among indulgent consumers. They found that consumers attempt to "launder" the negative emotions resulting from overindulgence by subsequently making more utilitarian (versus hedonic) consumption choices, thereby restoring a self-view of prudence and restraint. Direct behavioral compensation such as this is well understood by researchers and lay people alike.

What is much less understood, however, are the diverse forms of behaviors that can psychologically compensate for moral transgression and the lack of conceptual overlap required between the compensatory behavior and the transgression. Carlsmith and Gross (1969), for example, noted that compliance with requests for help increases after moral values have been violated, even when such compliance in no way rectifies the previous damage. Similarly, inflicting punishment upon oneself also represents a path to redemption. Wallington (1973) found that people who violate moral rules will actively cause themselves to suffer in other domains. In an ostensible test of perceptual sensitivity, participants were asked to administer electric shocks to themselves. Those who had previously been induced to lie to the experimenter delivered more severe shocks to themselves than those who had not lied.

Underlying these compensatory behaviors is the basic need to affirm one's central values. According to Wicklund and Gollwitzer's (1981) self-completion theory, we each have ways of defining ourselves, and when an aspect of our self-definition is inadequate or threatened, we engage in activities that complete the definition (e.g., an athlete who receives criticism from his coach may put in additional training). To the extent that a person's moral identity consists of diverse traits such as honesty, compassion, and diligence (Aquino & Reed, 2002), moral self-completion may involve any subset of those traits. Thus, an individual whose moral self is threatened by dishonesty may volunteer in a soup kitchen as compensation. Similarly,

we should not be surprised to discover that a disingenuous politician may be the most dedicated of blood donors, or that a tax evader may be the most generous of philanthropists. Such examples are consistent with self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) as well as Tesser's (2001) work on the plasticity of self-defense that documents remarkable flexibility in how individuals respond to threats and repair identity. Of course, it is more effective to compensate in a manner that is consistent with the threat, (e.g., those experiencing cognitive dissonance after a hypocritical act would rather reduce dissonance by directly amending the inconsistent behavior than by affirming themselves in another domain, Stone, Wiegand, Cooper, & Aronson, 1997); nevertheless, alternative routes can be equally effective when a direct route is not available or is too costly.

The strongest evidence for moral-compensatory motivation comes from moral-cleansing theory (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000), which suggests that when individuals violate their own values, they are likely to engage in moral cleansing that reaffirms their values and loyalties. Moral cleansing is much broader than direct restitution; it can include any activities that affirm one's core values rather than just behaviors that directly repair the damage caused by the transgression. Thus, when social liberals discovered that the formula they devised for insurance premiums was based on the racial composition of the neighborhood, they not only directly compensated for their moral infraction (i.e., by revising their premium estimates), they also expressed interest in attending African American cultural events and racial-equality rallies (Tetlock et al., 2000). Interestingly, one does not have to be personally implicated in a moral violation to experience a threat to one's moral identity. Exposure to others' moral infractions is sufficient to instill a sense of contamination (Tetlock et al., 2000). For example, participants who read about someone endorsing reprehensible behavior felt morally defiled and were more likely to volunteer for a campaign against the behavior.

While Tetlock's work dealt with cleansing that was strictly symbolic, other researchers have identified a literal version of moral cleansing that pushes the envelope of compensatory methods. In their work on the "Macbeth effect," Zhong and Lijenquist (2006) explored the possibility that moral violations could engender feelings of physical contamination, in which case physical cleansing could serve as a surrogate for moral purification and allow individuals to literally cleanse their consciences. By manipulating exposure to unethical behavior in multiple ways, the authors determined that moral threats activate one's need to cleanse physically. This was demonstrated through concept accessibility, attitudinal preferences for household cleansing products, and actual behavioral choices. In one experiment, participants who had recalled either an ethical or an unethical deed from their past were given the opportunity to choose between two free gifts—a pencil

or sanitizing hand wipes. Those whose moral identity had been threatened by the unethical memory were twice as likely to choose the hand wipes as those who had recalled an ethical deed. In a subsequent experiment, Zhong and Lijlenquist (2006) tested whether physical cleansing actually alleviates pangs of guilt and restores moral self-image. Participants were asked to write about an unethical behavior they had committed. Afterwards, half of the participants were given the opportunity to sanitize their hands with an antiseptic wipe. Those who cleansed their hands experienced a reduction in moral emotions (e.g., regret and guilt) and were significantly less likely to engage in compensatory behaviors (volunteering to participate in a study for free) than those who were not given the opportunity to physically cleanse themselves. In this sense, physical cleansing washed away moral sins by reducing the dissonance inflicted by the recall of unethical behavior.

Thus, the literature on moral compensation confirms our view of moral regulation: Threats to an individual's moral image induces compensatory behaviors to repair the moral self. What is more important, however, is that those compensatory behaviors do not always repair the damage caused to others by the initial transgression. Instead, morality threats and feelings of guilt can also be mitigated by symbolic compensation such as minor self-punishment or even a hand washing. These recent studies expand the scope of moral cleansing and provide compelling support for the general efficacy of indirect and symbolic moral restitution.

Moral Licensing

Prior behavior motivates moral compensation, but it can also license subsequent actions that are morally questionable. Strahilevitz and Myers (1998) showed that promising to donate to charity made consumers' subsequent choices more frivolous. Kivetz and Simonson (2002) showed that the more effort a customer-loyalty program required, the more customers preferred luxury rewards over necessity rewards, suggesting that past effort justifies future extravagance. Other research predicts that seeing current self-control choices in terms of a series of future self-control choices will increase self-control (Benabou & Tirole, 2004; Loewenstein & Prelec, 1991); however, if one is overly optimistic about one's future self-control, such optimism can license current indulgences (e.g., "I can spend today, since I will save tomorrow."). The goal-achievement literature contains similar examples. Fischbach and Dhar (2005) demonstrate that pursuit of higher-order goals (e.g., exercising) can license the pursuit of lower-order and more tempting goals (e.g., snacking).

In their work on conflicts of interest, Cain and his colleagues (Cain, Loewenstein, & Moore, 2005, 2009; Moore, Cain, Loewenstein, & Bazerman, 2005; Cain, 2006) argue that the seemingly forthright act of disclosing one's conflict of interest can license giving worse advice (i.e., advice biased towards the advisor's self-interest and further from objective truth). Prior disclosure, the authors claim, leads advisors to feel that the audience has been warned, thereby rationalizing that disclosure makes it okay to give biased advice. For example, suppose "Jim" is offering house-buying advice to a new arrival in town. The house in question has been appraised at \$200,000, and Jim knows this. Jim values telling the truth, but he has a conflict of interest when it comes to the home's value: Jim's favorite cousin owns this house. If Jim does not disclose his conflict of interest and succumbs (intentionally or unintentionally) to his self-interest, Jim might inflate the home's value. No surprise there. And, not surprisingly, the potential buyer may not suspect foul play and may anchor his estimate of the home's value on the inflated figure provided by Jim. What is surprising, however, is that Cain and colleagues' research suggests that if Jim discloses his conflict of interest (i.e., warns the prospective buyer that his cousin owns the house), Jim will be more inclined to exaggerate the value of the house because he feels less responsible for telling the truth. Alerted by the disclosure, the advisee will discount the advice when warned, but not enough to counteract the increased bias in the advice; in their studies, Cain and his colleagues find that the audience is ironically worse off for having been cautioned against the conflict of interest. It seems that disclosure might warn an audience to cover its ears, but it may also license conflicted advisors to yell even louder.

It is as if prior good acts earn points in a mental account that subsequent immoral acts can spend. Indeed, Khan and Dhar (2006) show that prior choices that boost the self-concept tend to license self-indulgence; they also show that indulgence diminishes if the prior good acts are attributed to an external motive. An alternative explanation also exists: Prior good acts can cast a positive light on subsequent acts, regardless of the motivation behind the prior acts (Monin & Miller, 2001). This is the sort of license people seek when prefacing a racist joke by saying that their best friend belongs to the same race that they are ridiculing. It is not as if having friends of a certain race earns "points" that can be spent by uttering racist jokes; rather, one hopes that, because of one's diverse social connections, the joke can not be construed as evidence that the teller is racist. In both cases, however, individuals' prior behavior licenses subsequent actions, highlighting the need to examine behavioral histories to understand moral regulatory mechanisms.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Conscious versus Unconscious

The idea that individuals construct their moral images based on recent or salient behaviors seems to contradict research on self-esteem which shows no evidence that engaging in unethical behaviors reduces self-esteem. Researchers have found that previous dishonesty does not dampen the favorability of self-descriptions (Wallington, 1973), that rewards obtained by lying have no impact on the self-esteem of liars (Cooper & Duncan, 1971), and that aggressive behavior (Okel & Mosher, 1968) and inflicting harm on others (Glass & Wood, 1969) does not tarnish self-evaluations. One possible explanation is that self-esteem is a composite measure that captures many different aspects of the self. When the moral aspect is lacking, people can easily make up for it on other dimensions (e.g., "I may have lied, but I am a worthy person because I am very smart [and/or because of the good things I did or am about to do]"). This highlights an important point: While individuals may be motivated to engage in compensatory behaviors, this may not be conscious. For example, Khan and Dhar (2006) found that people donated less money to charity after expressing a decision to help a foreign student in the future, but generally failed to acknowledge that these future intentions had affected their charitable donations. Such findings suggest that moral balancing may occur below the level of conscious awareness.

Consistency versus Deviation

The central tenet of our chapter is that moral regulation is a dynamic process that involves the interplay of the perceived moral self and ideal moral self. Unlike traditional research that predicts consistency in moral behavior based on traits or tendencies such as moral identity and moral disengagement, our model predicts a dynamic equilibrium: An initial immoral act may produce future moral behaviors and vice versa. This leads to the question of when we can expect consistency and when we will observe the ups and downs of a dynamic equilibrium (Zhong, Ku, Lount, & Murnighan, 2008).

We speculate that the tendency to be consistent rather than fluctuate (as in our model) may be partly dependent on how central morality is to one's self-definition. For individuals who place morality at the very core of their self-concept, we may expect greater consistency over time. Those individuals may scrupulously monitor their behavior according to their moral standards and hence display less deviation from their moral ideal compared to others. Damon and Hart (1992), for example, state that, "there are both

theoretical and empirical reasons to believe that the centrality of morality to self may be the single most powerful determinant of concordance between moral judgment and conduct." Given this, we might also expect consistency from people who have self-interest at their core. Taken to the extreme, imagine people completely self-interested; free from moral regulation, their behaviors would be entirely driven by their own benefits, and they would be consistently selfish. Finally, there is a wide band of people who fall somewhere in the middle—those who value morality but for whom moral living is not a core component of their identity. Among these individuals, moral regulation may predict inconsistency, driving individuals to compensate for sins of the past when their morality is threatened and license indiscretions when moral regulatory forces relax. Of course, even within this middle band of people, there will still be some degree of consistency as individual differences inevitably account for some of the variance in moral behavior, but our perspective of moral decision-making predicts far less consistency than models that ignore behavioral history.

CONCLUSIONS

Moral regulation is a complex process; when we are perplexed by others' seemingly incongruous behavior, we should step back and consider their actions in the context of their behavioral history. The sequence of ethical decisions that comprise each individual's behavioral history is a critical predictor of moral behavior. Seeming altruism may spring from past misdeeds, while transgressions may ironically be rooted in bygone virtues. The dynamic nature of moral regulation means that people can find themselves most vulnerable to temptation at the very moment they believe they have achieved their moral ideals. Thus, it is not just bad apples who make rotten choices in life; as the ethical pendulum swings, even the best among us are unlikely to chart an undeviating course of virtue. However, the alternating mechanisms of moral compensation and licensing may establish a dynamic equilibrium around which moral behaviors can be predicted.

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Psychological Perspectives on Ethical Behavior and Decision Making

edited by

David De Cremer
Erasmus University

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Psychological perspectives on ethical behavior and decision making / edited
by David De Cremer.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-60752-105-1 (pbk.) – ISBN 978-1-60752-106-8 (hardcover)

1. Organizational behavior. 2. Psychology, Industrial. I. De Cremer,
David.

HD58.7.P79 2009


174'.4–dc22

2009011494

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INFORMATION AGE PUBLISHING, INC.
Charlotte, NC • www.infoagepub.com

Printed in the United States of America