

Running head: MORAL COURAGE

Moral Convictions and Moral Courage:
Common Denominators of Good and Evil

Linda J. Skitka

University of Illinois at Chicago

Skitka, L. J. (2012). Moral convictions and moral courage: Common denominators of good and evil. In M. Mikulincer & P. Shaver (Eds.), *Social psychology of morality: Exploring the causes of good and evil* (pp. 349-365). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

Moral Convictions and Moral Courage:

Common Denominators of Good and Evil

Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change a world that yields most painfully to change. Each time a person stands up for an idea, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, (s)he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance. (Robert F. Kennedy)

We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality. (John Adams)

On June 5, 1989, one day after the Chinese government's violent crackdown on the Tiananmen protests, a man placed himself directly in the path of a column of tanks that were approaching the Square. He acted alone, holding nothing but one shopping bag in each hand. As the lead tank attempted to drive around him, the man calmly moved to continue to block the path of the tank, flapping the bags to signal his insistence that the tanks halt. After repeatedly trying to go around rather than run over the man, the lead tank stopped its engines, and the armored vehicles behind it seemed to follow suit. After some attempts at communication, the tanks restarted their engines apparently in anticipation of moving on, but the man jumped in front of the lead tank and continued his pattern of passively blocking the tank's movements. This showdown continued and a crowd grew to watch with amazement as the dance between man and tank unfolded. Eventually two men (presumed to be secret service) emerged from the crowd and escorted the man away. Those close to the situation believe that the "Unknown Rebel" was likely executed in the aftermath of the military crackdown on Tiananmen protesters; the Chinese government was never able to produce him after photos and videotape of the incident became public (Witty, 2009).

On the morning of May 31, 2009, Dr. George Tiller, a father of four and a grandfather of ten children, was serving as an usher at Lutheran Reform Church in Wichita, Kansas. He was standing in the foyer of the church when he was approached by a man who raised a gun and shot Dr. Tiller once in the head, which instantly killed him. The assailant—Scott Roeder—threatened to shoot two other men who attempted to apprehend him at the scene, before getting into his car and driving away. These witnesses later provided the police with the license plate number of the car Roeder was driving, and police apprehended Roeder a couple of hours later. Dr. Tiller owned and operated one of the only abortion clinics in Kansas. Pro-life political action groups had specifically targeted Dr. Tiller’s clinic for protests and legal action, in part because his clinic provided late-term abortions when they were medically indicated. Roeder had previously posted anti-Tiller comments on various Internet sites; for example, one post dated September 3, 2007, and placed on a site sponsored by Operation Rescue, claimed "Tiller is the concentration camp 'Mengele' of our day and needs to be stopped." Many pro-life organizations condemned Roeder’s behavior, but others (most notably the Army of God) embraced Roeder and even launched a “Scott Roeder: American Hero” website.¹

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the positions, beliefs, or actions of the Unknown Rebel or Scott Roeder, each demonstrated moral courage—a willingness to personally stand up and stand out in defense of a principle, even when others were standing aside. This chapter will cover two topics related to the issue of moral courage. First, this chapter will challenge the accepted wisdom in social psychology that suggests that certain kinds of strong situations will almost inevitably overwhelm people’s motivation and willingness to take a stand in the name of their moral beliefs. Although there is evidence that people are inclined to obey authorities or

¹ <http://www.armyofgod.com/POCScottRoederIndexPage.html>

conform to group norms, until recently, few studies actually measured whether people are as likely to do so when their core moral convictions are at stake. Second, although some acts of moral courage are likely to be interpreted by observers as relatively unambiguous goods, good and evil sometimes become less clear when acts of moral courage are related to actors' political, social, or cultural beliefs. The same behavior can be interpreted as good or evil depending on which side of the fence the perceiver happens to be on, or which group the perceiver belongs to. Good and evil may therefore at times represent post hoc and subjective categorizations, not differences in the motivational foundations of the behavior being judged (A. G. Miller, 2004).

Before turning to evidence that challenges the view that strong situations overwhelm the capacity for moral courage and a discussion of the normative implications of this construct when attributing good versus evil, I first provide some theoretical and empirical background on the concept of moral courage and strong situations as a boundary condition on when it is expressed.

Moral Courage

Moral courage is a willingness to take a stand in defense of principle or conviction even when others do not (W. I. Miller, 2000). People who exhibit moral courage are often subject to a number of risks associated with taking a stand, including inconvenience, unpopularity, ostracism, disapproval, derision, and even harm to themselves or their kin. Although moral courage may have costs, it "does not back you fearfully into dangerous corners so much as draw you inexorably toward first principles. It is less about risks, hazards, obstacles, and [more] about values, virtues, standards, and rightness" (W. I. Miller, 2000, p. 36).

Several decades of work in social psychology reveal that strong situations seem to have the power to undermine or overwhelm people's moral courage. Strong situations can make even clearly normal, moral, and good people do what most would consider to be very bad things (see

Zimbardo, 2005, for a recent review). Two of these situational constraints will be reviewed next, along with some reasons for skepticism about whether they conclusively demonstrate the suppression of moral courage.

Do Powerful Situations Overwhelm the Potential for Moral Courage?

The Milgram Obedience Studies

One of the most convincing and famous demonstrations of the power of situations was a series of experiments on destructive obedience conducted by Stanley Milgram (1974). In these studies, an authority figure commanded participants to inflict painful electric shocks on another person. More often than not, participants complied with the authority's commands and gave what they believed to be increasingly powerful shocks, even when the presumed victim protested that the shocks were not only uncomfortable, but were aggravating a pre-existing heart problem.

Milgram (1974) interpreted the results of these studies in the following way:

Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority (p. 6).

In summary, Milgram argued that people's over-whelming sense of obligation to obey authorities trumped their normal sense of conscience or morality, which would suggest that they should do no harm. The view that people's personal moral standards become less relevant, or even functionally irrelevant, when they come into conflict with the commands or decisions of legitimate authorities, however, seems open to alternative explanations and conclusions. For example, Milgram did not establish whether his participants perceived the choice between

defying and complying with the experimenter's requests as a trade-off between their personal morality and a duty to obey; rather he assumed that his participants saw the situation in this light (see Doris, 1998, for a similar critique). Similarly, most studies that have examined people's willingness to accept negative decisions when they are made by legitimate or procedurally fair authorities do not measure whether perceivers have a moral stake in these situations rather than, for example, only a material stake in them. To know for certain whether people are willing to sacrifice their moral beliefs because of a duty or obligation to obey legitimate authorities, it seems necessary to know first what those moral beliefs are and second, whether people see these beliefs as relevant to the situation at hand (an issue I will return to shortly).

Conforming to the Group

Another famous demonstration of the power of the situation was a series of experiments conducted by Solomon Asch. In one version of the experiment, a naïve participant would show up at the lab, only to discover that he was the last to arrive at the session. The other 8 or 10 participants for that session had already arrived and were seated around a table (the other seven participants were actually working for the experimenter as confederates). Participants were told that the experiment was testing people's visual judgments, and that their task was to say which of three different lines matched a standard. On some trials, all the other participants, one by one, claimed that an obviously incorrect line matched the standard. Surprisingly, more than half of the real participants went along with the majority on these trials, even though the majority of the group was clearly giving the wrong answer. These results led Asch (1955) to conclude that "the tendency to conformity in our society is so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black. This is a matter of concern. It raises questions about our ways of education and the values that guide our conduct" (p. 34).

Asch had reasons for concern. For example, delinquent behavior is learned through exposure to delinquent companions, who can pressure new group members to conform to anti-social norms. Indeed, exposure to delinquent peers is the most powerful predictor of delinquent behavior (Empey & Stafford, 1991; Warr, 1993). Nor are peer and situational influences on willingness to embrace asocial or illegal behavior limited to youth. For example, dozens of analyses have been conducted on what went wrong at Enron, an American energy company that once had spectacular profits and growth but is now known for one of the most stunning collapses in business history (Jenkins, 2003). Most analyses of what went wrong at Enron focus on its corporate culture, which was characterized by enormous pressure to conform to group norms (e.g., Sherman, 2002; Tourish & Vatcha, 2005). Those who did not get with the program quickly were labeled “chumps” or “losers,” or worse (e.g., they were summarily fired). Employees who wanted to survive in the company—and there were incredible financial incentives for them to want to do so—were essentially required to replace their pre-existing beliefs and values with those of the group (Tourish & Vatcha, 2005). The outcome was an environment dominated by what has been described as “bounded choice” (Lalich, 2004), a context in which the expression of only a limited and tightly regulated repertoire of beliefs, behaviors, and emotions was permissible. There was little room for employees to focus on honesty or ethics when the corporate culture was consumed instead with generating unprecedented profits and growth.

Although it is clear that groups can have an incredible influence on whether and when people engage in immoral or unethical conduct, the notion that people consciously reject their moral compasses to conform to group norms in contexts like Enron is often based on inference rather than direct empirical tests. Putting the most Machiavellian extremes at Enron aside, the chances are that the majority of Enron professionals were at least initially unaware of the gradual

accumulation of pressures on them to slant their conclusions, a process known as moral seduction (Moore, Tetlock, Tanlu, & Bazerman, 2006). Moreover, the ethics at Enron and elsewhere appear to have shifted in focus from what is morally right to what is technically legal (Moore & Lowenstein, 2004). Given what we know about motivated reasoning and self-serving biases in human cognition (Kunda, 1990), it is plausible that people at Enron psychologically managed to recode any possible moral breaches as something else entirely (e.g., behavior that was legally justified).

In summary, the notion that people reject their moral compasses in strong situations has often been inferred from various studies, but it is a question that until recently has seldom if ever been explicitly tested. Recent research suggests that when we directly measure whether people have a moral stake in a given situation, we find that they often muster the moral courage to resist pressures to obey legitimate authorities or follow the crowd.

Moral Convictions as Boundary Conditions on the Power of Strong Situations

Many controversies involve advocates and opponents who see specific issues in terms of self-evident and fundamental truths about right and wrong. To support alternatives to what is “right,” “moral,” and “good” is to be absolutely “wrong” and “immoral,” if not evil. Disagreements about issues that people view in a moral light seem to be closed to compromise—even in the face of pressure from authorities or peers to surrender one’s position—because to do so would be to undermine first-order truths or conceptions of the good. More specifically, the strength of people’s moral conviction about issues of the day should provide them with the moral courage to resist the usual pressures to obey legitimate authorities or to conform to group norms about those issues. Rationales for these specific predictions are outlined next.

Authority Independence

When people's moral convictions are at stake, they are more likely to believe that duties and rights follow from the greater moral purposes that underlie rules, procedures, and authority's dictates, than from the rules, procedures, or authorities themselves (Kohlberg, 1976; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). Moral beliefs are not by definition anti-establishment or anti-authority, but they are not dependent on establishment, convention, rules, or authorities. Instead, when people take a moral perspective, they focus more on their ideals, and the way they believe things "ought" to or "should" be done, than on a duty to comply with authorities.

Given that people often do not know the "right" approach to various decisions or conflicts, or exactly what they should do in novel situations like Milgram's (1974) experiments, they frequently rely on authorities, rules, or laws to provide guidance about appropriate ways to behave. However, when people do have strong moral convictions about what they should do, or what outcomes authorities and institutions should deliver, they are more likely to have the moral courage to defy authorities, the rules, or the law. In short, the *authority independence hypothesis* predicts that when people have a personal moral stake in a given situation they should be less concerned about complying with authorities or the law and more concerned about doing the right thing, even if it may be costly to do so.

Research with both children and adults is consistent with the prediction that people's moral convictions act as constraints on the power of authorities to constrain moral courage. For example, children say that hitting and stealing are wrong, even if a teacher says it is okay (Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Smetana, 1981, 1985). Similarly, children endorse obedience to moral requests (e.g., to stop fighting) made by any person, including other children, but they endorse obedience to norms (e.g., seat assignments) only when a directive comes from legitimate authorities

(Laupa, 1994). Moreover, these patterns of results replicate across a wide array of nationalities and religious groups, and even when the religiously devout are confronted with counterfactuals about God's authority. For example, people continue to insist that killing would still be wrong, even if God were to indicate it was okay (Nucci & Turiel, 1993).

The authority independence hypothesis has also been tested in the context of Americans' reactions to a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling (*Gonzales v. Oregon*, Skitka, Bauman, & Lytle, 2009). The Court's task was to decide whether states have the power to legalize physician-assisted suicide. A nationally representative sample of adults was surveyed shortly before the Court heard arguments in the case, and then the same people were surveyed again after the Court made its ruling (*note*: the Court decided that States have the right to decide whether physician-assisted suicide is legal within their borders). Participants provided ratings of their support or opposition for physician-assisted suicide, the degree to which these attitudes were moral convictions², and their pre-decision perceptions of the U.S. Supreme Court's legitimacy. The post-ruling survey included measures of decision fairness and acceptance, as well as post-ruling perceptions of the Supreme Court's legitimacy.

The authority independence hypothesis predicts that people would be more likely to accept the Supreme Court's ruling in this case if it was consistent with their morally vested support for legalizing physician-assisted suicide. Conversely, people would be more likely to reject the decision as either fair or final if their opposition to physician-assisted suicide was morally vested. Finally, this pattern of results should be equally likely regardless of whether _____

² Skitka et al. (2009) and Wisneski et al. (2009) operationalized moral convictions about physician-assisted suicide in terms of participants' responses to two items: "To what extent are your feelings about physician-assisted suicide a reflection of your core moral values and convictions?" and "To what extent are your feelings about physician-assisted suicide deeply connected to your beliefs about 'right' and 'wrong'?" Participants responded on 5-point scales with the points labeled *not at all*, *slightly*, *moderately*, *much*, and *very much*. These items were strongly correlated, $r = .84$.

people saw the Supreme Court as more or less legitimate prior to making its ruling in this case, and when controlling for whether their position on physician-assisted suicide was deeply connected to their personal religious beliefs. Results supported each of these hypotheses (Skitka et al., 2009). Similar results emerged in a variety of more controlled experiments (e.g., Bauman & Skitka, 2009; Skitka & Houston, 2001) and in other field studies of people's reactions to actual legal decisions (e.g., Skitka & Mullen, 2002).

Moreover, people's moral convictions about physician-assisted suicide not only predicted people's reactions to the Court's decision in the *Gonzales v. Oregon* case, they also affected their pre-ruling trust in the Court to get the question of physician-assisted suicide right in the first place (Wisneski, Lytle, & Skitka, 2009). Regardless of whether they supported or opposed physician-assisted suicide, those whose positions reflected strong moral convictions distrusted the court to get the issue right. Moreover, this distrust reflected a quick and visceral response: Those with stronger moral convictions responded to the distrust item more quickly than those whose position on physician-assisted suicide reflected weak moral convictions (again, controlling for a number of alternative explanations, including attitude importance and religious conviction). In short, people do not react only to decisions with which they morally disagree—they do not trust even legitimate authorities to make the right decision in the first place.

There is also behavioral support for the prediction that people reject authorities and the rule of law when outcomes violate their moral convictions. For example, Mullen and Nadler (2007) exposed people to legal decisions that supported, opposed, or were unrelated to their 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 prediction that decisions, rules, and laws that violate people's moral

convictions erode the power of authorities and authority systems who decide these things, participants were more likely to steal the pen after exposure to a legal decision that was inconsistent rather than consistent with their personal moral convictions.

In summary, there is growing evidence that people make important distinctions between different judgmental and attitudinal domains, and are much less likely to blindly follow authority's dictates when they are at odds with their personal moral convictions. Instead, even young children have the moral courage to defy legitimate authorities when authorities make decisions or requests that are directly at odds with their situationally relevant and activated moral beliefs. Similarly, adults feel no compulsion to necessarily accept even one of the most legitimate and trusted authorities in the U.S. (the U.S. Supreme Court) as having the final say about controversial issues of the day. In these cases, people are more likely to change their view of the Court than to change their minds about their fundamental beliefs about right and wrong (Skitka et al., 2009).

The Inoculation Hypothesis

That people usually conform to majority opinion in a group is well known (see Cialdini & Trost, 1998, for a review). The reason why people conform to group norms even when they individually have a contrary point of view stems in part from fears that going against group norms risks ridicule and disenfranchisement, and in part from hopes that going along with the group will maintain or build acceptance and belonging (Asch, 1956). At other times, people conform because they are not confident about the right answer or the best way to behave, and they turn to peers for guidance and information (e.g., Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Sherif, 1936).

When people have strong moral convictions about a specific issue, however, they prefer to distance themselves from attitudinally dissimilar others convictions (Haidt et al., 2003; Skitka

et al., 2005; Wright et al., 2008). They should therefore have little need to look to peers to discover the “right answer” in that attitude domain. In other words, when people have strong moral convictions about a given issue, they should be more resistant to majority influence because they have less need to be accepted by the group or to use consensus as a source of information.

In addition, because people experience moral convictions much like facts (wrong is wrong, right is right, end of story), there is little room for the group to provide informational influence. Finally, failing to defend a matter of perception (e.g., “Which line matches the standard?”), as people did in the classic Asch (1956) studies, has little cost in the form of shame, guilt, or moral inauthenticity to those who conform. In contrast, people are likely to experience a failure to defend their core moral convictions as a deep threat to their personal sense of moral authenticity. For these reasons, majority group influence, conformity, and other forms of social influence should be weaker for those with strong compared to weak moral convictions in the domains of attempted influence (the *inoculation hypothesis*).

Consistent with the inoculation hypothesis, strong moral convictions about a given issue does protect people from the usual pressures to capitulate to group norms or majority opinion. For example, Hornsey, Majkut, Terry, and McKimmie (2003) tested whether people would be more resistant to group norms when their attitudes had a moral dimension. Participants first indicated their support for or opposition to gay law reform and a number of other issues, and then reported the degree to which their attitude about gay law reform reflected a moral conviction.³ Participants were then told that the study in which they were participating was part of a much

³ Hornsey et al. (2003) used a three-item scale to assess moral conviction: “To what extent do you feel your opinion is morally correct?” “To what extent do you feel your position is based on strong personal principles?” and “To what extent do you feel your position on gay law reform is a moral stance?” Responses were recorded using a 1 – 9 scale with the endpoints labeled *not at all* and *very much*, $\alpha = .73$.

wider program of research that had been on going for some time. Using a procedure that has been established as inducing normative influence (White, Hogg, & Terry, 2002), participants (all of whom supported gay law reform to some degree) were presented with three graphs that presumably summarized the results of the last three years of survey results. The graphs indicated that the student body was roughly evenly divided on two of the filler issues participants had rated earlier, but were very united in either their support of or opposition to the question of whether gay couples should be legally recognized. In the support condition, participants were told that, on average, 85% of the student body supported, 8% opposed, and 7% were undecided about whether gay couples should be legally recognized. In the oppose condition, participants learned that 85% of the student body opposed, 8% supported, and 7% were undecided about this issue. After being exposed to consensus information that they were either in the opinion minority or majority, participants rated their degree of willingness to engage in a variety of public actions (e.g., sign a letter to the editor, distribute information leaflets) or private behaviors (e.g., sign a petition, vote in a referendum) to support gay legal reform.

Consistent with the inoculation hypothesis that moral convictions buffer people from conformity pressure, strength of moral convictions emerged as a strong predictor of moral courage, operationalized as a stated willingness to engage in both public and private behavior in support of gay legal reform. More important for the argument being advanced here, however, is the fact that although degree of normative support (i.e., whether participants believed they were in the opinion minority or majority) affected whether those with weak moral convictions about legal reform were willing to engage in private acts of support (i.e., as normative support of their position increased, they were more willing to do private things to support the cause), degree of normative support had no effect on the willingness of those with strong moral convictions to do

so. Rather, their willingness to sign a letter, for example, remained high (and higher than those with weak moral convictions) even when they were in the opinion minority.

Other results indicated that normative support or opposition did not significantly moderate the main effect of moral conviction on willingness to engage in public behavior in support of legal reforms. In other words, those with stronger moral convictions were more likely to say they would engage in more public acts in support of the cause than were those with weaker moral convictions, regardless of whether they were in the opinion minority or majority. Moreover, these results emerged even when statistically controlling for plausible alternative explanations for the moral conviction effects, such as attitude extremity or strength (Hornsey et al., 2003; see also Hornsey, Smith, & Begg, 2007).

This initial research explored whether consensus affected decisions about whether people would be willing to take a stand in the name of their moral beliefs, with very promising results. However, it remained unclear whether self-reported intentions to voice one's opinion translated to actual behavior. Therefore, we recently tested whether strength of moral conviction predicted actual expression of one's opinion in the presence of a majority of one's peers who had a different opinion (Aramovich et al., 2009). Hypotheses were tested in the context of recent public discussions about the permissibility of torture in interrogating suspected terrorists. Even though nearly every society and moral system condemns the use of torture, and despite recent outcries about Abu Ghraib, more than half of Americans nonetheless support the use of torture when interrogating suspected terrorists. Perhaps more surprising, public support for the use of torture has been increasing rather than decreasing since 2005 (Sidoti, 2009).

To test whether people's moral convictions protect them from majority influence in the context of their positions about torture, we created a conformity paradigm inspired by Asch

(1956) to measure participants' behavioral responses to a majority of peers who expressed a viewpoint opposed to that of the participants. More specifically, participants in this study provided their pre-experimental positions on torture of suspected terrorists and the degree to which their attitude on the issue reflected a strong moral conviction (along with completing a number of attitude strength control measures) during a mass testing session at the beginning of the semester. (The torture items were embedded in a longer questionnaire that assessed attitudes related to a variety of issues to reduce the specific salience of torture.)

Several weeks later, participants who had indicated that they opposed the use of torture were recruited to laboratory in small-group sessions in which they sat at individual computer carrels. Participants were instructed that they would be participating in a study that examined the effect of computer-mediated communication on a subsequent face-to-face small group discussion. They were told that the goal of the in-person group discussion was to draft a short position statement summarizing the group's opinion about the use of torture. Participants learned that prior to this discussion, however, they would share their opinions with one another over the computer.

Participants met their fellow "group members" by sharing their initials, which were displayed to everyone in "the group" via a computer program. (All computerized feedback was in fact pre-programmed; although all participants thought they were interacting via computer with other people in the room, they were in fact receiving pre-programmed responses from the "other" group members). Participants were instructed that they would, in a randomly determined order, share their opinion about the use of torture. In every case, however, the true participant was always selected to share his or her opinion last. Other group members' positions were displayed at 10- to 11-second intervals, and they respectively reported "strong support,"

“moderate support,” “slight support,” and “strong support” of the use of torture against suspected terrorists (in that order). After viewing all four group members’ opinions, participants shared their own opinion, at which point the experiment concluded (there was no subsequent face-to-face discussion).

Moral conviction associated with participants’ opposition to the use of torture emerged as the strongest predictor of resistance to majority influence in this experiment, regardless of whether attitude change was measured continuously (degree of change from pre-experimental positions) or nominally (i.e., changing sides from opposition to support of the use of torture). These results emerged even when controlling for attitude certainty and importance.

In summary, there is considerable evidence that people’s moral convictions protect them not only from pressures to blindly obey or comply with authorities’ commands and decisions, but it also protects them from various other kinds of strong pressures to set aside their beliefs, including the pressure of majority group influence. Moral convictions clearly provide people with the moral courage and fortitude to literally “go it alone” if necessary and to defend their point of view, even when it is very lonely to stand up for what they are convinced is right.

Revisiting the Normative Implications of Moral Courage

Heroism has been defined as the commitment to a noble purpose and the willingness to accept the consequences of fighting for that purpose (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006), a definition that seems quite consistent with what would count as an act rooted in moral courage. Moral courage and the capacity for heroism have typically been seen as basic goods—as traits worth celebrating and encouraging as much as possible. Behaviors and actions that one person might interpret as acts of moral courage or heroism, however, seem to be profoundly influenced by

whether those actions are consistent or inconsistent with the political, social, moral, or cultural views of the perceiver.

For example, although it is easy to see how a figure such as Oskar Schindlar, who saved close to 1,200 Jews during the Second World War, might count as a hero, it is also not too difficult to imagine that he would have been seen as a traitor by the victors if Nazi Germany had won the war. Those who flew airplanes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001 undoubtedly believed that their actions and cause were noble, and they clearly accepted the ultimate personal cost of their actions. Few in the U.S. would say that these actions were moral or heroic, but more than 67% in a Gallup poll of nine Muslim countries did so (George, 2002).

In short, there seems to be a difficult, very fine, and subjective line between our definitions of who is to be counted as a hero and martyr and who is to be condemned as an evildoer and villain; both great good and great evil can be perpetrated in the name of noble and morally esteemed ends (see also Baumeister, this volume). As important as it is for social psychologists to study the psychological processes that lead to good and evil acts, it is equally important not to let our values about what counts as good or evil blind us to the possibility that others have an opposing but equally “moral” (by their standards) view. Without denying the reality of psychopathy and genuine evil, in many cases the people who perpetuate evil acts are motivated by beliefs that they feel are noble and morally inspired. Scott Roeder, for example, probably did not wake up on May 31, 2009, and say to himself, “Today is a good day to do evil.” From all accounts, his position was instead, “Today I’m going to rid the world of evil, and save thousands of lives in the process.”

Although some claim that the only way for people to overcome the usual self-sanctions against doing harm to others is to morally disengage and shut down normal moral self-regulatory

functioning (Bandura, 1999), it seems more likely that people must be maximally morally engaged to reject the safety of “going along” and instead fight for their beliefs about right and wrong. Scott Roeder and the Unknown Rebel did not morally shut down; they morally revved up and found moral courage to do what they thought was right. That said, their actions may be judged as wrong-headed in the extreme. One’s interpretation of their behavior as good or evil, brave or foolhardy, however, does not change the motivation that led them to take their respective stands. A complete psychological portrait of what leads to evil in the world, and not just to heroism, requires paying attention to the role that moral courage plays in motivating people to take a stand even when it means rejecting authorities and the rule of law, the safety of normative support, being censured and demonized by those with different views, and the possibility of jail or death.

It is therefore extremely important to study and understand the psychology of moral conviction and courage. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Robert F. Kennedy argued that “moral courage... is the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change a world that yields most painfully to change.” Without moral courage we would not see the advancement of women’s literacy in Afghanistan, greater civil rights and economic growth among groups historically discriminated against in U.S. or elsewhere, or increased freedom from human rights violations in many parts of the world. Nor did many of the gains in these areas come without the price of blood. The American Civil War and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, both played roles in advancing civil rights.

Even if we come to the conclusion that great evil can spring from the same functional and motivational foundations as great good, we cannot afford to extinguish the human capacity for moral conviction and courage. What we need to do instead is come to a better understanding of

the role of these motivations in human affairs, and discover better ways to channel them to a consensual conception of the good. A willingness to reject authorities, the rule of law, and even the influence of one's closest peers when one knows what is "right" may constitute the best of human nature if these actions are ultimately in the name of the greater good. Finding agreement on what constitutes the greater good, however, would seem to present a more difficult challenge than finding people willing to fight for it.

Conclusion

The power of the situation is not to be underestimated when trying to understand why people sometimes do horrible things. That said, the mantra that situations consistently overwhelm people's everyday commitments to their moral beliefs and convictions may be overstated. Few of the classic studies of the power of the situation directly tested the core hypothesis that morality was overwhelmed in the contexts studied. Because a great deal of blind obedience to authority was observed in Milgram's (1974) studies, for example, it was assumed that participants' moral convictions had been superseded. The analysis presented here does not undercut the conclusion that the majority of people in the Milgram (1974) studies complied, or that the majority of delinquents experience considerable peer pressure to engage in crime, or that Enron employees seemed to check their moral compasses at the door. It merely posits that participants' obedience, compliance, or conformity in these situations may have had nothing whatsoever to do with the suppression of active moral concerns.

At first pass, it may seem like very good news indeed to discover that people have the moral courage to resist destructive obedience or conformity to the group when their moral convictions are at stake. Our enthusiasm should be muted, however, because moral courage may not always come in flavors everyone finds palatable. It is all fine and good that people are

willing to disregard legitimate authorities, cast off the shackles of law, and disregard peer opinion to do what they autonomously believe is right, moral, and good *if and when* their conception of what is right, moral, and good happens to be consistent with our own. One troubling aspect of moral convictions, however, is that they are associated not only with a greater willingness to reject the usual safeguards of civil societies (e.g., obeying authorities and the law, conforming to group norms), but also with an increased tolerance of violence and vigilantism to achieve preferred ends (e.g., Skitka & Houston, 2001).

The normative implications of these findings are therefore both reassuring and terrifying. Yes, moral conviction and associated moral courage act as a protection against obedience to potentially malevolent authorities or blind conformity to group norms. However, moral convictions also provide a motivational foundation and justification for violence and terrorism. 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 superiority. Justice, the common welfare, universal ethics, and God have each been used to justify any variety of forms of oppression, murder, and genocide (Mischel & Mischel, 1976). Given that strong moral convictions are associated with accepting any means to achieve preferred ends, gaining more insight into the psychology of how and why moral convictions promote constructive, but potentially also quite destructive, forms of moral courage is a critical agenda for continued scientific investigation.

References

Aramovich, N. P., Lytle, B. L., & Skitka, L. J. (2009). *We're not judging lines anymore: Moral mandates reduce conformity to the group*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Psychological Science, San Francisco, CA.

- Asch, S. E. (1955). Opinions and social pressure. *Scientific American*, *19*, 31–35.
- Asch, S. E. (1956). Studies of independence and conformity: A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychological Monographs*, *70*, 1–70.
- Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perception of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *3*, 193-209.
- Bauman, C. W., & Skitka, L. J. (2009). Moral conflict and procedural justice: Moral mandates as constraints to voice effects. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, *61*, 40 – 49.
- Cialdini, R. B., & Trost, M. R. (1998). Social influence: Social norms, conformity, and compliance. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (4th ed., pp. 151–192). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Doris, J. M. (1998). Persons, situations, and virtue ethics. *Noûs*, *32*, 504-530.
- Deutsch, M., & Gerard, H. B. (1955). A study of normative and informational social influences upon individual judgment. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *51*, 629–636.
- Empey, L. T., & Stafford, M. C. (1991). *American delinquency: Its meaning and construction* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Evans, M. (2009). Scott Roeder’s ex-wife: “He could actually do it.” Retrieved from <http://www.fox4kc.com/news/wdaf-scott-roeder-suspect-tiller-53109,0,6281347.story>, February 24, 2010.
- Franco, Z., & Zimbardo, P. (2006). The banality of heroism. *Greater Good*, *3*, 30–35.
- George, L. (2002, March 3). Muslims skeptical on terror war. Retrieved July 14, 2003, from <http://www.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/europe/03/03/gallup.reaction>
- Hornsey, M. J., Majkut, L., Terry, D. J., & McKimmie, B. M. (2003). On being loud and proud: Non-conformity and counter-conformity to group norms. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *42*, 319–335.

- Hornsey, M. J., Smith, J. R., & Begg, D. (2007). Effects of norms among those with moral conviction: Counter-conformity emerges on intentions but not behaviors. *Social Influence, 4*, 244–268.
- Jenkins, R. (2003). Crisis of confidence in corporate America. *Mid-American Journal of Business, 18*, 5–7.
- Kohlberg, L. (1976). Moral stages and moralization: The cognitive developmental approach. In T. Lickona (Ed.), *Moral development and behavior: Theory, research and social issues* (pp. 31-53). New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- Lalich, J (2004). *Bounded choice: True believers and charismatic cults*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Laupa, M. (1994). Who's in charge? Preschool children's concepts of authority. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 9*, 1-17.
- May, S., & Zorn, T. (2003). Forum: Communication and corporate social responsibility, Forum introduction. *Management Communication Quarterly, 16*, 594–597.
- Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to authority*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Miller, A. G. (2004). Introduction and overview. In A. G. Miller (Ed.), *The social psychology of good and evil* (pp. 1 – 20). New York: Guilford press.
- Miller, W. I. (2000). *The mystery of courage*. Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press.
- Mischel, W., & Mischel, H. N. (1976). A cognitive-social learning approach to socialization and self-regulation. In T. Lickona (Ed.), *Moral development and behavior: Theory, research, and social issues* (pp. 84-107). New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

- Mooney, C. Z. (2001). The public clash of private values: The politics of morality policy. In C. Z. Mooney (Eds.), *The public clash of private values: The politics of morality policy* (pp. 3–20). New York: Seven Bridges Press.
- Moore, D. A., & Loewenstein, G. (2004). Self-interest, automaticity, and the psychology of conflict of interest. *Social Justice Research, 17*, 189–202.
- Moore, D. A., Tetlock, P. E., Tanlu, L. & Bazerman, M. H. (2006). Conflicts of interest and the case of auditor independence: Moral seduction and strategic issue cycling. *Academy of Management Review, 31*, 10-29.
- Mullen, E., & Nadler, J. (2008). Moral spillovers: The effect of moral violations on deviant behavior. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 44*, 1239-1245.
- Nucci, L. P., & Turiel, E. (1978). Social interactions and the development of social concepts in pre-school children. *Child Development, 49*, 400-407.
- Nucci, L., & Turiel, E. (1993). God's word, religious rules, and their relations to Christian and Jewish children's concepts of morality. *Child Development, 64*(5), 1475–91.
- Rest, J. R., Narvaez, D., Bebeau, M. J., & Thoma, S. J. (1999). *Postconventional moral thinking: A neo-Kohlbergian approach*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Sherif, M. (1936). *The psychology of social norms*. New York: Harper.
- Sherman, S. (2002). Enron: Uncovering the uncovered story. *Columbia Journalism Review, 40*, 22–28.
- Sidoti, L. (2009). Poll: Half of Americans think torture is sometimes justified. *Huffington Report*, retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/03/poll-slight-majority-of-a_n_210700.html October 3, 2009.

- Skitka, L. J., Bauman, C. W., & Lytle, B. L. (2009). The limits of legitimacy: Moral and religious convictions as constraints on deference to authority. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 97*, 567-578.
- Skitka, L. J., Bauman, C. W., & Sargis, E. G. (2005). Moral conviction: Another contributor to attitude strength or something more? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 88*, 895–917.
- Skitka, L. J., & Mullen, E. (2002). Understanding judgments of fairness in a real-world political context: A test of the value protection model of justice reasoning. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 28*, 1419-1429.
- Smetana, J. G. (1981). Preschool children's conceptions of moral and social rules. *Child Development, 52*, 1333-1336.
- Steiger, P. (2002). Not every journalist “missed” the Enron story. *Neiman Report, 10–12*.
- Tourish, D., & Vatcha, D. (2005). Charismatic leadership and corporate cultism at Enron: The elimination of dissent, the promotion of conformity, and organizational collapse. *Leadership, 1*, 455–480.
- Turiel, E. (2002). *The culture of morality: Social development, context, and conflict*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Warr, M. (1993). Age, peers, and delinquency. *Criminology, 31*, 17–40.
- White, K. M., Hogg, M. A., & Terry, D. J. (2002). Improving attitude-behavior correspondence through exposure to normative support from a salient ingroup. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 24*, 91–103.
- Wisneski, D. C., Lytle, B. L., & Skitka, L. J. (2009). Gut reactions: Moral conviction, religiosity, and trust in authority. *Psychological Science, 20*, 1059-1063.

Witty, P. (2009). Behind the scenes: Tank man of Tiananmen Square. Posted June 3, 2009.

Retrieved from <http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/03/behind-the-scenes-tank-man-of-tiananmen/> February 15, 2010.

Wright, J. C., Cullum, J., & Schwab, N. (2008). The cognitive and affective dimensions of moral conviction: Implications for attitudinal and behavioral measures of interpersonal tolerance. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 34*, 1461-1476.

Zimbardo, P. G. (2005). A situationist perspective on the psychology of evil: Understanding how good people are transformed into perpetrators. In A. G. Miller (Ed.), *The psychology of good and evil* (pp. 21 – 50). New York: Guilford Press.

Author Notes

Thanks to Brad Lytle, G. Scott Morgan, Nicole Mayer, William McCready, and Daniel Wisneski for their comments on a previous version of this manuscript. Correspondence about this paper should be addressed to Linda Skitka, 1007 W. Harrison St., Department of Psychology (MC 285), University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL 60607-7137 or lskitka@uic.edu.