

The Dark Side of Moral Conviction

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Moral conviction forms the foundation for strong, morally vested attitudes and beliefs (i.e., “moral mandates”) that have high action potential because they are “oughts” and “shoulds.” Although moral mandates may sometimes lead people to engage in prosocial behaviors, they can also lead people to disregard procedural safeguards. This article briefly reviews research that indicates that people become very unconcerned with how moral mandates are achieved, so long as they are achieved. In short, we find that commitments to procedural safeguards that generally protect civil society become psychologically eroded when people are pursuing a morally mandated end. Understanding the “dark side” of moral conviction may provide some insight into the motivational underpinnings of engaging in extreme acts like terrorism, as well as people’s willingness to forego civil liberties in their pursuit of those who do.

Events like the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon naturally give rise to questions about what could possibly motivate anyone—*anyone*—to embark on such an incredibly horrific mission. These attacks involved not only a willingness to be a martyr for one’s cause, but also a willingness to take the innocent lives of untold numbers of others. Clearly, the people who were at the front lines of this attack had strong beliefs about their cause. To say that they had a “strong attitude,” however, hardly seems to capture their likely feelings.

Similarly, Americans’ reactions to these events do not seem to be well captured under the rubric of attitude strength, a concept that is typically defined in terms of attitude extremity, certainty, and importance (e.g., Petty & Krosnick,

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1995). For example, recent public opinion polls indicate that Americans are suddenly willing to forego numerous civil liberties, or restrict the civil liberties of others, in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks. Gallup polls (September 14 and 15, 2001) indicate that 58% of Americans favor subjecting Arabs, including those who are U.S. citizens, to more intensive security checks before boarding airplanes in the United States; 49% also believe that Arabs and Arab Americans should carry special identification (Jones, 2001).¹

Moreover, Americans' willingness to compromise the procedural safeguards that define our liberal democracy are going hand in hand with a nearly consensual desire for vengeance: 92% of Americans support taking military action, and 65% support going to war, even if it means there will be American casualties (Newport, 2001a). Although there are any number of social psychological lenses through which one can view these events, we hope to provide some insight into the psychological foundations of why people sometimes feel compelled to "take a stand" to express and defend their core moral beliefs, and some of the consequences of doing so.

Moral Conviction and Moral Mandates

Morality refers to notions of right and wrong. A conviction is an unshakable belief in something without needing proof or evidence. Moral conviction, therefore, refers to a strong and absolute belief that something is right or wrong, moral or immoral. Moral convictions have a strong motivational component because they are "oughts" or "shoulds" that are closely connected to people's sense of themselves as fundamentally decent and good people (cf. Higgins, 1987). Although some moral convictions may be the result of a careful, deliberate, and thoughtful appraisal and subsequent acceptance of a specific moral precept (e.g., it is immoral to eat meat), moral convictions do not require reason or evidence. People at times judge moral and immoral, right and wrong, on the basis of deeply visceral and intuitive, rather than deliberative, cognitive processes that they support with post hoc rather than a priori reasoning (see Haidt, in press). For example, most Americans and others had a strong and absolute sense that the recent terrorist attacks were fundamentally wrong and needed no justification for believing they were wrong. Regardless of whether they are arrived at through careful reasoning or a more intuitive "gut level" reaction, moral convictions are nonnegotiable, terminal, and fundamental psychological truths.

¹ Although one could argue that Americans' willingness to give up some civil liberties is rooted in fear of further terrorist attacks, we suggest that at least some people may also be willing to trade off the notion of a free and open society to pursue a morally mandated end—for example, vengeance against those responsible for the attacks.

We define moral mandates as the specific attitude positions or stands that people develop out of a moral conviction that something is right or wrong, moral or immoral (Skitka, in press). Moral mandates share the characteristics of other strong attitudes—that is, extremity, importance, and certainty—but have an added motivational and action component, because they are imbued with moral conviction. For example, many Americans and others have a moral conviction that the recent terrorist attacks were fundamentally immoral and wrong. Those who share this moral conviction would have a moral mandate if they expressed it in the form of a specific attitude position or stand (e.g., strong, morally vested support for waging war against nations that harbor terrorists or strong, morally vested support for efforts to help those who were harmed by the attacks). People are most likely to express and defend moral mandates when under threat or when they have a need to prove to themselves or others that they are authentically moral (Skitka, in press; Steele, 1988).

We predict that when people respond to an event with moral conviction (e.g., that the terrorists' actions were fundamentally immoral), a need will be activated to privately and publicly reaffirm their belief that they (in contrast) are authentically good and moral. There are a number of ways people can accomplish this goal, including adopting moral mandates related to prosocial behaviors (e.g., forming a strong and morally vested attitude about the value of donating blood), adopting moral mandates related to the denigration and punishment of those who behaved immorally (e.g., forming a moral mandate about the need to use military force to fight terrorism), or both. It is important to point out, however, that attitudes and behaviors that the perceiver believes are morally mandated will always be seen by the perceiver as justified and for the greater good. The terrorists, no doubt, were also responding to perceived threat to their core moral values (e.g., encroaching secularism and Western values that were threatening their extreme fundamentalist beliefs) when they developed the action potentials, or moral mandates, that led to their terrorist attacks.

Thus, having a moral mandate—that is, a strong attitude with an equally strong moral investment—can facilitate proactive and generally prosocial behaviors, as well as provide justification for antisocial behaviors. For example, recent evidence indicates that moral conviction can promote civic participation. Skitka and Bauman (2001) found that people were significantly more likely to vote during the 2000 election if their preference for president was based on their core moral values and convictions. This result emerged even after the effects of how strongly perceivers preferred their candidate and how strongly they identified with a particular political party were controlled. Accordingly, Americans' prosocial reactions in response to the terrorist attacks (e.g., donating to the Red Cross) can be partially explained by their moral conviction that something must be done in response to such an immoral act.

Moral Mandates and Tolerance of Vigilantism

Having a moral mandate has also been associated with a disregard for procedural protections and due process. For example, Skitka and Houston (in press, Study 2) found that if people's desire for vengeance is morally mandated, they have little concern for how their vengeance is achieved. Research participants in this study read about the police investigation and arrest of a man who allegedly killed a young couple in the course of a burglary. Half the participants learned that the defendant received a fair trial, was convicted, sentenced to death, and subsequently died in the electric chair. The other half of the participants learned the same details of the investigation and arrest but learned that the defendant had been shot and killed on his way to trial by a vigilante. When participants had a moral mandate that the defendant should be punished, they reported that the defendant's outcome and the procedure that led to it were equally fair, regardless of whether it was achieved by way of a fair trial or vigilantism. In short, when people had a moral mandate, due process was an irrelevant concern. Only participants who did not have a moral mandate about defendant guilt or punishment saw vigilantism as significantly less fair than a trial.

The vigilantism study provides some insight into the motivations of the terrorists. Because the terrorists were likely to feel very morally mandated about their cause, any means—including taking the lives of thousands of innocent civilians—justified their ends. Moreover, these results also shed some insight into why the majority of Americans are committed to military action against the terrorists, even at the cost of the lives of American soldiers or innocent civilians (Newport, 2001b). Although it comes at high cost, the cause is perceived to be moral and just.

Moral Mandates and Reactions to Real-World Political Events

In addition to laboratory research like the vigilante study, other research has demonstrated that moral mandates also play a role in how people view and react to real-world political controversies. Skitka and Mullen (2001) investigated a national random sample of Americans' reactions to the Elián González case at three critical junctures: preraid, immediately postraid, and then post-resolution of the case. Recall that Elián González was a 5-year-old boy found floating off the coast of Florida in an inner tube on November 25, 1999. He survived the capsizing of the boat in which he was a passenger, which killed his mother and 10 others during their attempt to reach the United States from Cuba. Elián became the center of a widely publicized custody debate about whether he should be allowed to stay in the United States with his relatives or be returned to Cuba to his father. After months of court decisions, appeals, and fruitless negotiations, federal agents took Elián by force from his Miami relatives' home in an early morning raid. Elián returned to Cuba with his father on June 28, 2000.

The degree to which people had a moral mandate about how the case should be resolved emerged as the strongest predictor of people's subsequent acceptance of the resolution of the case, as well as whether they believed it had been fairly or unfairly resolved. The results were very clear: People were much more concerned that the "right" outcome was achieved than with whether it was achieved by means of a fair or unfair process. People who had a moral mandate that Elián be returned to his father felt the raid was procedurally fair and appropriate and thought the outcome of the case was fair. In contrast, those who had a moral mandate that Elián stay in the United States were outraged at the raid, did not see it as procedurally fair or appropriate, and were similarly unwilling to accept the final resolution of the case as fair.

In sum, American citizens appeared to be more concerned that government and legal authorities arrived at their morally mandated outcome than whether the government and legal authorities dignified and respected the involved parties' rights to due process. These results suggest that to the extent that people have embraced the "war on terrorism" as a morally mandated end, they will be prepared to sacrifice any number of procedural safeguards to achieve it.

Conclusion

There are some disturbing implications of the results of the vigilante and Elián studies. Moral mandates appear to go well beyond being moral standards that allow people to evaluate the fairness of outcomes and the procedures that yield them. Rather, moral mandates appear to lead to the legitimization of any procedure so long as the mandated end is achieved. Moral mandates clearly form the foundation and justification for prosocial actions (e.g., the compelling desire of many to do something, anything, they could try to help in the wake of the September 11 disaster). However, there is another side to moral conviction: Moral convictions and moral mandates can also form the psychological foundation and justification of any number of extreme actions to achieve a mandated end. How far is it from accepting "deserved" vigilantism on the part of others to justifying any form of one's own behavior—rioting, spying, engaging in vigilantism, war—so long as it achieves the morally mandated end? People who bomb abortion clinics or who, like the Weathermen, engaged in violent protests against the Vietnam War, may have very different political orientations but are fundamentally alike. Both are or were motivated by deep moral convictions. Consistent with this notion, Mischel and Mischel (1976) pointed out that

[h]istory 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 right, equality, freedom, and social equity have been used to justify every variety of murder including genocide. (p. 107)

In conclusion, there are many ways to attempt to understand the motivations of those involved in the recent terrorist attacks. In addition to attempting to understand the motivations of the perpetrators and those who support them, it is worthwhile to also attempt to understand Americans' reactions to these events and how those reactions are becoming and will become translated into policy positions and stands as we attempt to cope with a national desire for both increased security and retribution. We think continued investigation of the cognitive and motivational properties of moral conviction, especially as it gets expressed in attachments to issues and causes, could provide considerable insight into both the psychology of what led to, and our subsequent reactions to, the very grim, infuriating, tragic, and life-shattering events of September 11, 2001.

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