

Limits on Legitimacy: Moral and Religious Convictions as Constraints on Deference to Authority

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Various versions of legitimacy theory predict that a duty and obligation to obey legitimate authorities generally trumps people's personal moral and religious values. However, most research has assumed rather than measured the degree to which people have a moral or religious stake in the situations studied. This study tested compliance with and reactions to legitimate authorities in the context of a natural experiment that tracked public opinion before and after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in a case that challenged states' rights to legalize physician-assisted suicide. Results indicated that citizens' degree of moral conviction about the issue of physician-assisted suicide predicted post-ruling perceptions of outcome fairness, decision acceptance, and changes in perceptions of the Court's legitimacy from pre- to post-ruling. Other results revealed that the effects of religious conviction independently predicted outcome fairness and decision acceptance but not perceptions of post-ruling legitimacy.

Keywords: morality, legitimacy, obedience, religiosity, fairness

A common theme that cuts across many controversial issues of the day is that at least one side in each case defines its position in moral or religious terms. Controversies such as abortion, gay marriage, stem cell research, and the Iraq War each seem to have advocates and opponents who see these 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," "immoral," if not "evil" (e.g., Black, 1994; Bowers, 1984; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). Disagreements on issues people see in a moral or religious light would therefore seem to be closed to compromise, because to compromise would be to undermine first-order truths or conceptions of the good.

Some argue, however, that the most important role of law is to intervene in exactly these kinds of conflicts. Legal authorities can

resolve conflicts and shape subsequent public opinion by placing the imprimatur of the state on one or another set of values (e.g., Bilz & Nadler, 2009; Mooney, 2001). When people perceive an authority or legal system as legitimate, neither "consent of the governed" nor "benefits received" are required to justify obedience (e.g., Gelpi, 2003; Tyler, 2006). Instead, legitimacy is believed to create a duty and obligation to obey as an imperative that replaces even personal moral standards as a guide or primary motivation (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989).

In a related vein, legitimacy also provides authorities and institutions with a "reservoir of good will" that protects them from backlash from unpopular decisions (Easton, 1965, 1975; see also Hollander & Julian, 1970, 1978). Nowhere is the reservoir of good will more evident than in public reactions to the U.S. Supreme Court, an institution that commands an incredible bedrock of public support and perceived legitimacy. Although people may dislike specific rulings, their disagreement seldom if ever erodes the public's basic belief in the legitimacy of the Court (e.g., Caldeira, 1986; Caldeira & Gibson, 1992; Easton, 1965, 1975; Murphy & Tanenhaus, 1968). For example, even when the Supreme Court participated in the highly charged dispute about the outcome of the 2000 presidential election, there was little or no evidence of a decline in the public's view of the Court's legitimacy (Gibson, Caldeira, & Spence, 2003).

The goal of this study was to explicitly test whether legitimacy protects authorities from backlash when they make not only a disliked decision but also one that perceivers believe is morally or

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religiously wrong. Hypotheses were tested in the context of a natural experiment, specifically, by surveying a national random sample of adults before and after the U.S. Supreme Court decided whether states have the authority to legalize physician-assisted suicide (PAS). Before turning to the specifics of the study, we review (a) theoretical perspectives on morality and why moral investments in certain policy outcomes might undermine compliance with authorities' decisions in addition to affecting post-decision perceptions of the legitimacy of those who make policy decisions and (b) possible theoretical connections and disconnections of morality and religiosity.

Morality

For the last quarter of the 20th century, research on morality was dominated by developmental psychologists who often were deeply committed to character education. Important to many of these scholars was the notion that one could articulate and defend a secular theory of morality that could serve as the foundation for moral education programs in classrooms across the country, thereby circumventing the need to champion the values espoused by one religion at the neglect of others. To be useful from a pedagogical standpoint, however, a secular theory of morality also needed to be able to make universal claims without relying on divine will as the ultimate determinant of right or wrong; many scholars, educators, and parents alike were dissatisfied with education programs grounded in moral relativism. Therefore, many prominent theories of morality are rooted in rationalistic philosophy, stemming from ideas espoused by Spinoza, Kant, and others (e.g., Kohlberg, 1976; Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983).

In the past several years, however, there has been a surge of interest in the psychology of morality. Notably, this new wave of research is interdisciplinary, and it is unbounded by needs to be prescriptive. Instead, much of this new work has sought to be descriptive. That is, current research seeks to identify how morality functions, rather than to make claims about how it should function. This new perspective has led to theoretical and methodological innovations that have reinvigorated questions about the roles of reason and emotion (e.g., Haidt, 2001; Greene, Somerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001) and how people weigh means and ends when making moral decisions (e.g., Bartels, 2008; Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Skitka & Houston, 2001). Perhaps most important, researchers have begun to develop sophisticated theoretical approaches to morality that integrate previously disparate positions on these longstanding debates and explain how they can be incorporated into a single framework (e.g., Krebs, 2008; Moll, Zahn, de Oliveira-Souza, Krueger, & Grafman, 2005; Monin, Pizarro, & Beer, 2007).

Despite this increasing amount of sophistication regarding factors that can influence moral judgment, some basic questions remain about what qualifies as moral. Of course, the philosophy literature is rich with definitions of morality, and many researchers have capitalized on the vast amount of knowledge available. When examining moral judgment, many researchers create situations based on philosophical criteria that theoretically should prompt people to perceive those situations to involve a moral choice (e.g., trolley problems; Foot, 1978). Unfortunately, however, the definitional rigidity often found in the philosophy literature regarding what constitutes a moral situation is inconsistent with the defini-

tional flexibility that seems to exist in the minds of most individuals. Unlike philosophers, who often seek to achieve principled consistency, people appear to take a less dogmatic approach to morality, including what is and what is not a part of their moral purview (e.g., Darwin, 1982; Lester, 2000; Skitka et al., 2005). Therefore, there are likely to be gaps between what any two individuals consider to be moral, irrespective of whether situations are consistent with a given philosophical criterion of morality.

To eliminate ambiguity associated with when people perceive a situation to have moral implications, we take an empirical approach to studying moral conviction. Assessing variability in the extent that a situation elicits moral conviction in a given individual is important if one wants to ensure that the individual's response is motivated by morality, rather than by some other concern (e.g., material self-interest, social pressures). That is, our approach differentiates between moral and nonmoral at the level of the individual, rather than at the level of decisions, choices, or dilemmas. Although average people do not often seek to maximize principled consistency when making moral judgments, they nonetheless appear to have a strong intuitive sense of when their moral beliefs apply to a given situation (Skitka et al., 2005). That is, people can identify when situations engage their moral sentiments, even if they may not be able to elegantly describe the processes or principles they used to render their judgments (Haidt, 2001). Taking advantage of this ability gives our approach considerable precision and allows us to zero in on the unique antecedents and consequences of moral conviction.

Building on people's ability to identify when their moral beliefs apply to specific situations, we have articulated a number of ways that attitudes held with strong moral conviction are likely to differ in psychological consequence from attitudes that reflect nonmoral preferences instead (see also Skitka & Bauman, 2008; Skitka et al., 2005). Among other things, attitudes held with strong moral conviction ("moral mandates") are likely to be authority independent and used as important sources of information when evaluating authorities' legitimacy. The theoretical rationale for these hypotheses is provided below.

The Authority Independence Hypothesis

We argue that 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 dictate than from the rules, procedures, or authorities themselves (Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen, 2008; Skitka & Mullen, 2008; see also Kohlberg, 1976; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). Moral beliefs are not by definition antiestablishment or antiauthority; they just 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. Therefore, when people have a moral stake in a decision, we predict that their fairness reasoning and compliance is less likely to be based on authorities' and institutions' legitimacy and more likely to be based on their moral beliefs about right or wrong. In summary, the authority independence hypothesis predicts that when people have a moral stake in decision outcomes, their reasoning about outcome fairness and decision acceptance will be based more strongly on internal conceptions of personal

right and wrong than on their established perceptions of authorities' legitimacy.

The authority independence hypothesis is consistent with the notion that the force that undergirds morality comes from within and is largely independent of authority (e.g., Blasi, 1984, 1993; Kohlberg, 1976; Piaget, 1997). 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 only endorse obedience to norms (e.g., seat assignments) from legitimate authorities (Laupa, 1994). Also intriguing is the finding that adult psychopaths and children who exhibit psychopathic tendencies do not make distinctions between social norms and morals; they define morality in terms of whatever authorities or the rules dictate (Blair, 1995, 1997). Of interest to the current study is whether adults' reactions to legitimate legal authorities, such as the Supreme Court, also show evidence of authority independence.

Recent research provides some indirect support for the notion that moral convictions about decision outcomes may relate to perceptions of authority legitimacy. Specifically, one way that authorities enhance their legitimacy is by acting in procedurally fair ways (e.g., using procedures free from bias, that provide opportunities for constituency voice, or that treat involved parties with appropriate dignity and respect; see Tyler, 2006). Some of our previous research has demonstrated that when people have strong moral convictions about decision outcomes, the relative fairness of procedures has little or no effect on people's perceptions of outcome fairness and decision acceptance (see Skitka et al., 2008; Skitka & Mullen, 2008, for reviews). To the extent that authority legitimacy is determined by whether authorities act in procedurally fair ways, these results are consistent with the authority independence hypothesis.

Making decisions in procedurally fair ways, however, is not the only determinant of authority legitimacy (Gibson et al., 2003; Hollander & Julian, 1970, 1978; Tyler, 2006). Moreover, procedural fairness and legitimacy typically have independent rather than redundant effects on decision acceptance (e.g., Caldeira & Gibson, 1992; Gibson, 1989, 1991; Tyler & Rasinski, 1991). For example, Gibson (1989) studied the public's willingness to accept a decision to allow the American Nazi Party (ANP) permission to stage an anti-Semitic demonstration in Skokie, Illinois, a predominantly Jewish suburb of Chicago. Gibson's studies examined people's reactions to hypothetical scenarios that examined decision acceptance as a function of the perceived procedural fairness and legitimacy of government institutions (i.e., a local legislature, local court, the U.S. Supreme Court), but the research was inspired by a 1978 court case in which Federal trial and appellate courts ruled in favor of the ANP. Consistent with people's reactions to the ANP's legal victory, Gibson found that "perceptions of the fairness of the decision making processes within these institutions have virtually no impact on willingness to accept the institutional decision as final and binding" (p. 485). Nevertheless, people were more willing to accept the decision as binding if it came from the Supreme Court, rather than local authorities. Moreover, differences in the perceived legitimacy of the three institutions fully accounted for the effects of institution type on decision acceptance. In short, legitimacy of the institutions, but not procedural fairness, influenced people's reactions to the outcomes of the scenarios.

Since that initial study, the independent effects of procedural fairness and perceived legitimacy on compliance with and acceptance of authority's decisions has been replicated in a number of other contexts and domains, as well (e.g., Rasinski, Tyler, & Fridkin, 1985; Tyler, 2006).

The goals of the present research were to further investigate when people will comply with authorities such as the U.S. Supreme Court. One reason why Gibson (1989) may not have found evidence in support of an otherwise well-replicated fair process effect (i.e., an increased willingness to accept nonpreferred conclusions when they are decided by fair procedures) is that the public has strong moral convictions about whether neo-Nazis should be allowed to engage in anti-Semitic demonstrations. Moreover, Gibson did not test whether the decisions had any impact on the extent to which people perceived the decision-making institution to be legitimate post-decision. Given that there are clear differences in the degree to which perceived legitimacy and procedural fairness affect decision acceptance, it is important to test whether authority legitimacy represents an important boundary condition on the effects of moral convictions on willingness to comply with authorities who make nonpreferred decisions or rulings. Moreover, it would also be useful to test whether perceptions of the Supreme Court's legitimacy change from pre- to post-decision when people have a moral or religious stake in the issue being decided, something we turn to in our discussion of the litmus test hypothesis.

The Litmus Test Hypothesis

We predict that people's personal moral beliefs should affect not only their perceptions of decisions and willingness to comply with authorities but should also affect perceptions of authorities' legitimacy. People often do not know the "right" answer to various decisions authorities are asked to make (e.g., what is best for the group, whether a defendant is really guilty or innocent), and therefore, they frequently rely on cues like procedural fairness and an authority's legitimacy to guide their reactions (Lind, 2001). Consistent with this notion, research indicates that perceptions of legitimacy are relatively self-perpetuating. Perceivers tend to assume that negative decisions made by legitimate authorities are a consequence of external contingencies, rather than something about the authority or institution itself. Because people attribute the causes of unpopular decisions to something external to the authority or institution, the authority or institution is still seen as legitimate and fair, even when the outcome is not (Hegtvedt, Clay-Warner, & Johnson, 2003; Hegtvedt & Johnson, 2000).

However, when people have moral certainty about what outcome authorities and institutions should deliver, they do not need to rely on standing perceptions of legitimacy as proxy information to judge whether the system works. In these cases, they can simply evaluate whether authorities get it "right." "Right" decisions indicate that authorities are appropriate and work as they should. "Wrong" answers signal that the system is somehow broken and is not working as it should. In short, the *litmus test hypothesis* predicts that people use their sense of morality as a benchmark to assess authorities' legitimacy.

Previous research has determined that people perceive procedures to be less fair when they yield morally nonpreferred outcomes (e.g., Mullen & Skitka, 2006; Skitka & Mullen, 2002).

However, condemning behavior (e.g., the procedures used to make a decision) is psychologically distinct from condemning people or institutions that make decisions (e.g., denouncing the legitimacy of the U.S. Supreme Court). In summary, an important but heretofore uninvestigated question is whether people not only reject authorities' decisions and see them as more unfair when outcomes fail to match perceivers' morally convicted outcome preferences but also whether they are likely to subsequently reject the legitimacy of decision-making authorities or institutions, as well.

Morality, Religion, and Attitudes Toward PAS

In addition to testing the authority independence and litmus test hypotheses, studying citizens' reactions to a Supreme Court decision about the legalization of PAS also presented us with an opportunity to test whether the effects of moral conviction represent the same thing or something different from people's religious convictions. People's feelings about PAS have clear connections to both religiosity and morality. For example, fundamental Judeo-Christian and Islamic tenets insist that taking a human life defies divine prerogative (Kamali, 1999; Melton, 1991), and the vast majority of official church positions explicitly forbid the practice of PAS (Melton, 1991). Although beliefs of the faithful and the formal positions espoused by their faith do not always coincide, there nonetheless is a close connection between self-reported religiosity and people's feelings about PAS. Disapproval of PAS is three times higher among the self-reported religious than the nonreligious in the United States (Hamil-Luker & Smith, 1998).

In addition to having ties to religious convictions, people's feelings about PAS also relate to perceptions of morality. Although it remains to be seen whether perceptions of the morality of PAS can be distinguished from whether the practice is sanctioned by religious authorities, public opinion polls nonetheless find that PAS is among the top four of the most morally divisive issues in the United States (Saad, 2004). Only the moral acceptability or unacceptability of abortion, homosexuality, and having a baby outside of marriage evenly split American public opinion of moral acceptability to the same degree as PAS (Saad, 2004). Taken together, it is clear that many people associate their attitudes about PAS with their moral and religious beliefs. Therefore, PAS appears to be a suitable venue for testing hypotheses about the extent to which morality and religion necessarily are related. We turn next to theoretical views on the connection between morality and religion.

Theoretical Positions on the Relationship Between Morality and Religion

Of critical interest to the current research is testing different hypotheses about the theoretical similarities and/or dissimilarities of moral and religious conviction. There are at least three different schools of thought about the relationship of religiosity and morality. Specifically, some theories posit that morality is (a) functionally inseparable from religion and religiosity, (b) no longer tightly connected to religion (at least in modern consumer societies because of increased secularization of social life), or (c) something quite distinct from religion or religiosity (Morgan, 1983). More specifically, there are theoretical reasons to believe that moral

convictions are more authority independent than religious convictions. We explore each of these perspectives in turn.

Religion as the Motivational Source of Morality

One view suggests that morality and religion are inextricably connected constructs, and therefore, the motivational underpinnings of moral and religious conviction should spring from the same functional source. According to this view, within prevailing moral attitudes, there is "a golden thread of humanitarianism inspired by loving care, motivated by religion" (Bull, 1969, p. 94; cf. Morgan, 1983). Religion provides people with their values, and these values, in turn, support a larger system of meaning and worldviews, including people's conception of morality (Geertz, 1968, 1973; McCready & Greeley, 1976; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). In short, these theoretical perspectives see morality and religion as deeply connected if not inseparable constructs.

The Secularization Thesis

Another theoretical perspective suggests that morality has become increasingly separate from religion over time, especially in postindustrial and modern consumer societies. According to this view, secularization leads to increased "demoralization" of the public sphere. Although religion facilitated consensus and served an important function in pre- and early industrial society by reinforcing social cohesion and facilitating social control, modern consumer societies depend decreasingly on religion and increasingly on technical and legal mechanisms to maintain social control instead (e.g., Thompson & Sharma, 1998; Wilson, 1985; cf. Greeley, 1972). Therefore, the secularization thesis suggests that morality and religion may be tightly linked only among those who are still very religious, despite the downward trend in religiosity in the culture at large. In contrast, the views of secular authorities (e.g., prominent leaders and institutions) should dominate perceptions of morality and immorality for those who are not strongly religious. In other words, stronger moral convictions in connection with weak religious convictions may lead to greater acceptance of secular authorities' decisions.

The Distinguishable Constructs View

A third theoretical perspective suggests that morality and religion are fundamentally different constructs. For example, Kohlberg (1981) argued that religiosity and moral reasoning constitute two nonoverlapping areas of human concern. He contended that people grounded their conceptions of morality in rational arguments about justice and that cognitive development (e.g., maturation, education) and exposure to socio-moral experiences (e.g., socialization, role-taking opportunities) influenced people's sense of morality. Kohlberg maintained that religious knowledge represents the inculcated doctrine of religious authorities, whereas conceptions of morality are revelations about inherent characteristics of situations that one recognizes through experience.

More recent theories in moral development further refined Kohlberg's (1981) notion that religion is based more on authorities, rules, etc., whereas people's moral beliefs are comparatively authority independent (e.g., Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Turiel, 2002).

For example, if one asks an orthodox Jew whether it is appropriate to eat pork, the answer would be “no, it’s wrong.” However, if one posed the same question prefaced with the counterfactual, “If God were to say it was appropriate to eat pork, would eating pork be okay?” then many would agree that this behavior would be perfectly appropriate. In short, religious authorities or institutions determine what is permissible or impermissible, and at least some of these determinations evaporate in the absence of authority or institutional support.

In contrast, people define moral beliefs in absolute terms that transcend not only cultural context but also what authorities or institutions have to say about the matter. For example, most people posed with the counterfactual, “If God were to say it was appropriate to kill one’s neighbor without provocation, would killing one’s neighbor then be okay?” would respond, “No, it would still be wrong.” In other words, one theoretical characteristic of moral beliefs is that they are more authority independent than nonmoral beliefs (Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Turiel, 2002). Put another way, religiosity may in part reflect a generalized willingness to trust authority, regardless of whether the authority is religious or secular. Consistent with this notion, a high level of trust in religion loads on the same factor structure as general trust in the state and average trust in the government to handle a host of specific issues (Proctor, 2006).

In summary, the distinct constructs view represents a particularly hard form of the authority independence hypothesis. According to this view, moral convictions operate independently of all concerns about authority, regardless of whether authorities are conceived of in terms of the state or God.

Taken together, it is both theoretically interesting and empirically important to test the extent to which moral and religious convictions independently or jointly predict reactions to the Supreme Court’s decision about PAS. Not only are theories at odds about the connections between moral and religious convictions but these are often conflated or confused constructs in the public and academic mind, as well (e.g., Black, 1994; Bowers, 1984; Mooney, 2001). Therefore, one goal of this study was to test three hypotheses about the connections or disconnections of moral and religious conviction: The *morality as religiosity hypothesis* predicts that moral convictions are simply attitudes closely connected to people’s core religious beliefs (i.e., moral and religious convictions are indistinguishable). If the morality as religiosity hypothesis is true, then one would expect that (a) religious and moral conviction measures will be highly correlated, and (b) moral conviction will not explain unique variance in outcome measures (e.g., perceived outcome fairness, decision acceptance, or legitimacy) once the contribution of religious conviction is taken into account. The *secularization thesis* suggests that moral convictions may not explain variance in outcome variables when religious conviction is high but may add unique explained variance when religious conviction is low. In other words, moral and religious convictions will interact to predict reactions to decisions relevant to those beliefs. The *distinguishable constructs* view predicts that moral conviction will explain unique variance in reactions to policy decisions about PAS, even when controlling for both the main and interactive effects of moral and religious conviction. In other words, the distinguishable constructs view is a hard form of the authority independence hypothesis that predicts that the effect of moral convictions will be independent of the perceived legiti-

macy of secular institutions and the perceived authority of religious authorities or doctrine.

The Present Study

In summary, the goals of the present study were to test the authority independence and litmus test hypotheses and empirically examine theoretical positions on the relationship between morality and religion in the context of reactions to a real-world controversy. Specifically, we tested these hypotheses in the context of George W. Bush’s administration’s challenge to Oregon’s Death with Dignity Act. Until very recently,¹ Oregon was the only state in the U.S. that had legalized PAS. Oregon voters initially approved a Death with Dignity Act in 1994 (see <http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/pas> for the statute and details). The Oregon State legislature thought the public must have gotten it wrong and introduced a new referendum in 1997 to repeal the act. The majority of voters affirmed the Death with Dignity Act again by voting against its repeal. The legality of Oregon’s Death with Dignity Act, however, was challenged by the U.S. Attorney General (acting on behalf of the Bush Administration) in 2003 as violating the Federal Controlled Substance Act. After some other intermediary steps, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear the case in 2005. Later the next year, the Court announced its decision in favor of the State of Oregon, thereby endorsing state’s rights to legalize PAS and further opening the door for other states to pursue doing so.

We studied reactions to the *Gonzales v. Oregon* (2006) decision by using a longitudinal panel design. In other words, the same sample of people was asked to complete two surveys: one before the Supreme Court heard arguments about the case, and then another survey after the Court announced its ruling. The first survey collected pre-ruling perceptions of the legitimacy of the Supreme Court, participants’ attitudes about PAS, and the degree to which their attitudes about PAS reflected moral and religious convictions. The second survey assessed participants’ reactions to the Supreme Court decision, specifically, their perceptions of outcome fairness, decision acceptance, and their post-ruling perceptions of the Supreme Court’s legitimacy.

Method

Participants

The study sample was drawn from a panel of respondents maintained by Knowledge Networks (KN). KN recruits panel members using random-digit-dialing telephone selection methods, and the characteristics of the panel closely match those of the U. S. Census (see <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/> for comparisons of the panel with current Census figures). Once a panel member agrees to participate in the KN panel, they are given a free interactive device to access the World Wide Web (e.g., a Web TV), and free Internet access in exchange for participation in regular surveys.

A random sample of panel members received a password-protected e-mail to invite them to complete the survey. Panel

¹ The state of Washington passed a referendum legalizing PAS in the fall of 2008, after the U. S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the state or Oregon in the *Gonzales v. Oregon* case that was the focus of the current study.

members who completed the first survey were contacted again to complete a second survey shortly after the Supreme Court announced its decision in the case. Participants could access each survey only once via the hyperlink embedded in the e-mails, and the surveys were protected from nonpanel member access. A total of 678 participants responded across both waves of data collection and were retained for our analytical sample. Results were the same regardless of whether we included or excluded Oregonians from the sample, so results are reported with these respondents included.

Sample Characteristics

The final sample was 52% female, ranged in age from 19 to 90 years old ($M = 45.94$, $SD = 16.24$), and was 70% White, 11% Black, and 12% Hispanic (the remainder were of other ethnicities). Fifteen percent of the sample had less than a high school education, 32% graduated high school but had no college education, 27% had some college, and 26% had a bachelor's degree or higher. Forty percent of our sample had no prior home access to the Internet before joining the KN panel.

The Predecision Survey

A random sample of KN panelists was contacted several weeks before the Supreme Court heard arguments in the *Gonzales v. Oregon* case. The first survey included measures of the perceived legitimacy of the Supreme Court, attitudes about PAS, and moral and religious convictions associated with the issue of PAS. Participants responded to all Supreme Court measures before they responded to questions about the specific issue of PAS or religious convictions.

The Post-Decision Survey

Those who responded to the first survey were re-contacted within a few weeks after the Supreme Court announced its decision on *Gonzales v. Oregon*. The second survey began with questions about participants' relative familiarity with the resolution of the *Gonzales v. Oregon* case. After assessing all participants' degree of knowledge about the case, we gave them a brief factual account of the case and its resolution. The second survey included measures of outcome fairness, outcome acceptance, and post-decision perceptions of the legitimacy of the Supreme Court (i.e., we administered the legitimacy measure twice: once before the Court's decision and once after the decision).

Measures

Pre- and post-ruling perceptions of institutional legitimacy. Participants' perceptions of the institutional legitimacy of the Supreme Court were assessed using Caldeira and Gibson's (1992) five-item measure of perceived legitimacy of the Supreme Court. This scale measures degree of agreement or disagreement with the following statements: "If the United States Supreme Court continually makes decisions that the people disagree with, it might be better to do away with the Court altogether"; "People should be willing to do everything they can to make sure that any proposal to abolish the Supreme Court is defeated"; "It would not make much difference to me if the U.S. Constitution were rewritten so as to reduce the powers of the Supreme Court"; "The power of the

Supreme Court to declare acts of Congress unconstitutional should be eliminated"; and "The right of the Supreme Court to decide certain types of controversial issues should be limited by Congress." Higher levels of disagreement with these items reflected stronger commitment to the legitimacy of the Supreme Court.

Support/opposition to PAS. Participants' attitude about PAS was assessed with the following item: "Do you support or oppose physician-assisted suicide? Some people think that it is reasonable to let people with terminal illnesses decide with their doctors when to end their lives, that is, they support the legalization of PAS. Others think that suicide is wrong even for people who have terminal illnesses, and they oppose legalizing PAS. How do you feel about this issue?" Half of the participants were presented with a version of the question that placed the "some people support" aspect of the question first, whereas the other half received a version of the item that "some people oppose" PAS first. Opposition was coded -1 , uncertainty was coded 0, and support for PAS was coded 1.

Moral conviction. The degree to which participants experienced moral conviction about PAS was assessed with 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 point labels of *not at all*, *slightly*, *moderately*, *much*, and *very much*. These items correlated at $r = .84$. We averaged these items to create our moral conviction scale, with higher scores reflecting stronger moral convictions.

Religious conviction. We assessed the role of religious beliefs at the same level of specificity that we measured moral conviction. Specifically, participants were asked the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "My attitude about physician-assisted suicide is closely connected to my religious beliefs." Participants responded to this item on a 7-point scale with the point labels of *very much agree*, *moderately agree*, *slightly agree*, *neutral or uncertain*, *slightly disagree*, *moderately disagree*, and *very much disagree*. This measure was reverse scored so that higher scores reflected stronger connections of participants' beliefs about PAS with their religious beliefs. The religious and moral conviction items were asked in separate sections of the survey to avoid one item artificially affecting reactions to the other.²

Post-decision outcome fairness. Post-decision outcome fairness was measured with a single-item: "How fair or unfair is the decision to uphold Oregon's (and other state's) ability to decide to legalize physician-assisted suicide?" on a 7-point scale with the point labels, *very fair*, *moderately fair*, *slightly fair*, *neither fair nor unfair*, *slightly unfair*, *moderately unfair*, and *very unfair*. This item was reverse scored so that higher values reflected greater fairness.

² We also included a more standard religiosity measure (a short-form of the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire; Plante & Boccacini, 1997). We found the same pattern of results for religiosity, regardless of whether it was operationalized as attitude-specific religious conviction, generalized religiosity/spirituality, or a factor that combined the two measures.

Post-decision acceptance. Post-decision acceptance was measured with a single-item: “To what extent do you accept or reject the Supreme Court’s decision as the final word on this issue of whether states can decide to legalize physician-assisted suicide?” on a 7-point scale with the point labels, *very much accept, moderately accept, slightly accept, neither accept nor reject, slightly reject, moderately reject, and very much reject.* This item was reverse scored so that higher scores reflected greater decision acceptance.

Results

Hypotheses were tested using moderated regression (Aiken & West, 1991). Predictors were age, education, income, gender, measures of participants’ degree of support or opposition to PAS (a contrast code), centered measures of pre-ruling perceptions of the Supreme Court’s legitimacy, the degree to which their position on PAS was tied to religious beliefs, and the degree to which participants’ position on PAS reflected a moral conviction. We also included all interaction terms of the latter four variables in the analyses to predict outcome fairness, decision acceptance, and post-ruling perceptions of legitimacy. These results are summarized in Table 1 and are discussed with reference to our specific hypotheses below.

The Authority Independence Hypothesis

The authority independence hypothesis predicted that people’s policy preferences would have a stronger effect on perceived outcome fairness and decision acceptance when moral conviction was high rather than low. Specifically, when people’s attitudes are consistent with the Supreme Court’s decision, perceived fairness and decision acceptance should be higher when moral conviction is strong rather than weak. Similarly, when people’s attitudes are inconsistent with the Supreme Court’s decision, perceived unfairness and decision rejection should be higher when moral conviction is strong rather than weak.

In support of the authority independence hypothesis, moral conviction interacted with support/opposition to PAS to predict participants’ perceptions of outcome fairness, $B = 0.19, t(649) = 2.68, p < .01$, and decision acceptance $B = 0.18, t(649) = 2.57, p < .01$ (see Table 1). Analysis of simple slopes at $\pm 1 SD$ of the centered mean of moral conviction indicated that support/opposition to PAS had a stronger effect on perceived outcome fairness when support/opposition to PAS reflected strong, $B = 1.24, t(649) = 10.34, p < .001$, rather than weak moral convictions, $B = 0.66, t(649) = 3.71, p < .01$. As can be seen in Figure 1, the Supreme Court’s decision was seen as more fair when it was consistent with perceivers’ position on PAS and more unfair when it was inconsistent with perceivers’ position on PAS, especially when participants’ positions were held with strong moral conviction.

Results revealed a similar pattern of support for the authority independence hypothesis when it was tested with decision acceptance. Specifically, analysis of simple slopes at $\pm 1 SD$ of the centered mean moral conviction indicated that participants’ support/opposition to PAS had a stronger effect on decision acceptance when those positions reflected strong, $B = 1.21, t(649) = 9.49, p < .01$, rather than weak moral convictions, $B = 0.58, t(649) = 3.04, p < .01$. As can be seen in Figure 2, participants more strongly embraced the Supreme Court’s decision when it was consistent and more strongly rejected the decision when it was inconsistent with their support/opposition to PAS, especially when those policy preferences were held with strong moral conviction. Pre-ruling perceptions of the Supreme Court’s legitimacy had no significant effect on post-ruling judgments of outcome fairness and decision acceptance (see Table 1). In summary, morally convicted outcome preferences affected post-ruling perceptions of outcome fairness and decision acceptance, whereas pre-ruling perceptions of the legitimacy of the Court did not.

The Litmus Test Hypothesis

The litmus test hypothesis predicted that moral conviction would moderate the effect of support/opposition to PAS on post-

Table 1
Standard Regression Analyses (Unstandardized Regression Weights) Predicting Post-Ruling Outcome Fairness, Decision Acceptance, and Legitimacy

| Predictor | Outcome fairness | | Decision acceptance | | Post-ruling legitimacy | |
|-----------------------------|------------------|-----|---------------------|-----|------------------------|-----|
| | B | SE | B | SE | B | SE |
| Age | .01 | .38 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .03 |
| Education | .07 | .00 | .10* | .05 | .08 | .00 |
| Income | .04* | .04 | .04* | .02 | .02 | .02 |
| Gender | -.21 | .02 | .03 | .14 | -.12 | .01 |
| Pre-ruling legitimacy | -.04 | .13 | .06 | .07 | .58** | .07 |
| Position on PAS | .97** | .06 | .94** | .11 | .19** | .06 |
| Religious conviction | -.11** | .11 | -.09* | .04 | .02 | .02 |
| Moral conviction | .01 | .04 | -.05 | .07 | .00 | .03 |
| Position × Moral conviction | .19** | .07 | .18** | .07 | .10* | .03 |
| R ² | .32** | | .27** | | .39** | |

Note. PAS = physician-assisted suicide. Centered scores of pre-ruling legitimacy, religious conviction, and moral conviction were used in these analyses. All two-way interactions of pre-decision legitimacy, position, religiosity, and moral conviction were tested. Only significant interaction terms were included in the table.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

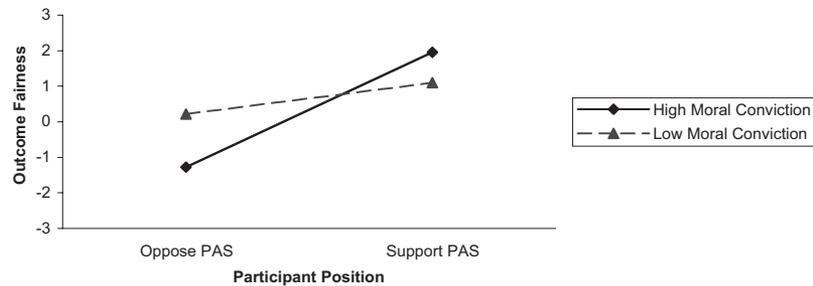


Figure 1. Participant position by moral conviction interaction effect on perceived outcome fairness. PAS = physician-assisted suicide.

ruling perceptions of the Supreme Court's legitimacy. In support of the litmus test hypothesis, people used the match or mismatch of the Supreme Court's decision to their morally convicted policy preferences as a litmus test of the legitimacy of the court. More specifically, results revealed the predicted moral conviction by support/opposition to PAS interaction on post-ruling perceptions of the Court's legitimacy, $B = 0.10$, $t(649) = 3.33$, $p < .05$ (see also Table 1). Analysis of the simple slopes at ± 1 SD of the centered mean of moral conviction indicated that support/opposition to PAS only had an effect on post-ruling perceptions of the Supreme Court's legitimacy when people's position on PAS reflected strong, $B = 0.26$, $t(649) = 2.95$, $p < .01$, rather than weak moral convictions, $B = 0.08$, $t(649) = 0.89$, ns (see Figure 3). No other effects were significant.

The Relationship Between Morality and Religion

As can be seen in Table 1, moral and religious convictions had independent effects on perceived outcome fairness and decision acceptance of the *Gonzales v. Oregon* ruling. Stronger religious convictions were associated with lower levels of outcome fairness and decision acceptance of the Supreme Court ruling in this case (note that nearly all those with strong religious convictions about PAS objected to the practice). Even when controlling for the effects of religious conviction, people perceived the Court's decision to be more fair and final when it was consistent with their moral convictions and more unfair and less final when it was inconsistent with their moral convictions (see Figures 1 and 2). No other interactive effects were significant, which means that the

effects of moral conviction were the same, regardless of whether participants had strong or weak religious convictions.

Although those high in religious conviction perceived the Court's decision as less fair and final, religious disagreement with the court's decision did not cause people to subsequently see the Supreme Court as less legitimate. Those whose feelings about PAS were strong moral convictions, however, did have a subsequently changed view of the Court's legitimacy (i.e., it was seen as more or less fair as a function of whether the Court ruling supported or opposed perceivers' moral convictions; see Figure 3). Once again, moral and religious conviction did not interact to predict changes in pre- to post-ruling perceptions of the Court's legitimacy. Taken together, the pattern of results associated with religious and moral conviction were therefore more consistent with the distinguishable constructs view and a hard form of the authority independence hypothesis than alternative hypotheses (e.g., the morality as religiosity or secularization hypotheses).

Discussion

The results of the present study supported the authority independence and litmus test hypotheses. Specifically, knowing whether people's feelings about the legalization of PAS were held with strong moral conviction predicted stronger reactions to the perceived fairness and unfairness of the Supreme Court's decision and people's acceptance or rejection of that decision as the final word on the issue. One of the novel contributions of this study is that moral convictions also predicted post-ruling perceptions of the Supreme Court's legitimacy. Although nonmorally vested support

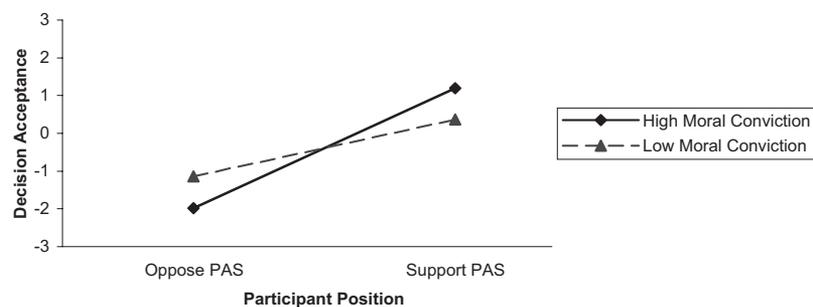


Figure 2. Participant position by moral conviction interaction effect on decision acceptance. PAS = physician-assisted suicide.

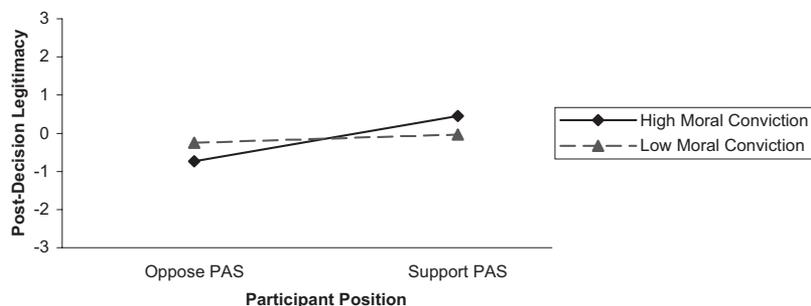


Figure 3. Participant position by moral conviction interaction effect on changes in pre- to post-ruling perceptions of the Supreme Court's legitimacy. PAS = physician-assisted suicide.

or opposition to PAS and religiosity had effects on decision acceptance and perceptions of outcome fairness, only those whose PAS policy preferences were high in moral conviction perceived the Supreme Court to be any more or less legitimate because of its decision. Taken together, a perceived obligation and duty to obey legitimate authorities does not lead people to check their moral and religious beliefs at the door. Instead, people use their moral and religious beliefs as one way to judge whether to comply with and accept authorities' decisions. People also used their moral beliefs—but not their religious beliefs—as a litmus test of the legitimacy of the Supreme Court.

Another novel contribution of the present study was the exploration of the connections and disconnections of moral and religious convictions. Although moral and religious convictions are often conflated and assumed to represent the same general construct (e.g., Mooney, 2001), our research demonstrates that they each uniquely contributed to understanding how people relate to authorities. The religious may not have liked the Supreme Court's decision in *Gonzales v. Oregon*, but their feelings about this specific decision had no effects on their subsequent feelings about the Court's legitimacy. In contrast, whether the Court ruling was consistent with perceivers' moral convictions not only affected participants' reactions to the specific decision in *Gonzales v. Oregon*, it also affected subsequent appraisals of the Court's legitimacy.

The results of the present study stand in rather sharp relief to other studies that generally find legitimacy to be highly stable and self-perpetuating (e.g., Hegtvedt et al., 2003; Hegtvedt & Johnson, 2000; Hollander & Julian, 1970, 1978). The results observed here are also inconsistent with the assumption that the Supreme Court's banked good will protect it from backlash when people have a moral or, to a somewhat lesser degree, a religious stake in the Court's decision (e.g., Easton, 1965, 1975; Gibson et al., 2003). Perceived pre-ruling legitimacy did not moderate the effects of people's morally or religiously vested policy preferences on decision acceptance or outcome fairness. That said, the effects of religious conviction were specific to the decision at hand. The religious may not have liked the specific decision the Court yielded in *Gonzales v. Oregon*, but they nonetheless continued to believe in the legitimacy of the Court. Where moral convictions differed from religious convictions was the degree to which the former were used as a litmus test on authority legitimacy: The Court was seen as more or less legitimate as a function of whether

it ruled consistently or inconsistently with perceivers' moral convictions.

Our results are also inconsistent with the notion that a duty and obligation to obey legitimate authorities trumps people's personal moral and religious beliefs in directing their behavior and reactions. For example, in Milgram's (1974) classic studies on the power of destructive obedience, an authority figure commanded participants to inflict painful 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 just uncomfortable but were aggravating a preexisting heart problem. Milgram (1974) interpreted the results of his studies the following way: "When asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority" (p. 6).

There are a number of reasons why our results look different from what has been observed in previous research on compliance with authorities' decisions. First, to our knowledge, none of these previous researchers measured the degree to which participants or perceivers had a moral or religious stake in the situations studied. For example, Milgram (1974) never asked if his participants perceived the choice between defying and complying with the experimenter's requests as a trade-off between personal morality and obedience; he assumed that they did (see Doris, 1998, for a similar critique). Similarly, researchers frequently assume that some issues are moral or religious and others are not, rather than ask questions that probe whether people see a given issue or situation as morally or religiously relevant to them. To know whether people are willing to sacrifice their moral or religious beliefs because of a duty and obligation to obey legitimate authorities, one first has to know what those beliefs are and ask whether people see them as relevant to the situation at hand.

The tendency to make assumptions that certain kinds of choices, decisions, and issues are moral seems to be rooted in Aristotelian notions of essentialism (e.g., Marcus, 1993). Researchers often treat certain issues (e.g., abortion) and dilemmas (e.g., trolley problems) as if everyone were certain to recognize and agree on the moral essence or fundamental character of the issue or dilemma. Our approach is agnostic about whether morality is an inherent quality of situations that is both real and knowable, but we do maintain that there is important and widespread variability in both the way and the extent to which situations engage moral

conviction in the minds of individuals (see also Bauman & Skitka, 2009). For example, one person may support a pro-choice position on abortion because he or she has a vested interest and preference for backstop birth control, and not because he or she has any particular moral investment in the right to choose. Another person might oppose legalized abortion because church authorities forbid the practice, without having any personal moral investment in his or her position. In summary, although some certainly see their position on abortion as rooted in their moral beliefs, there is variability in the extent to which people see this or other issues as reflecting their moral convictions. Church authorities may prescribe the domains of religious relevance, but here, too, there is likely to be individual variation in the degree to which people see their positions on specific issues as rooted in religious conviction, even if they are otherwise quite observant. The disconnect, for example, in the formal positions of the Catholic Church on reproductive freedom and the positions of otherwise devout lay members of the church often sharply diverge (e.g., Sanger, 2004). Therefore, it may be more powerful to measure religious conviction at the issue-specific, rather than a more global level of analysis.

In addition to shedding light on some of the distinctive effects of moral and religious conviction, the current study adds to a growing body of evidence that supports the idea that it is necessary to take a more empirical and psychological rather than a philosophical approach to defining morality. Variance in the degree to which people see their attitudes about issues as tied to their moral convictions predicts a host of phenomena besides authority legitimacy, ranging from a desire for greater social and personal distance from attitudinally dissimilar others to difficulties in conflict resolution in attitudinally heterogeneous groups (Skitka et al., 2005; Skitka & Morgan, 2009), as well as a greater probability of taking a number of different actions in the name of those beliefs (e.g., voting, signing petitions; Bauman, 2006; Skitka & Bauman, 2008). In sum, the results of the current study might look different from what has been observed in previous research on legitimacy, because we assessed, rather than asserted, the connection between the focal issue and people's moral beliefs.

Another reason why our results might look different from those of previous studies is that most research that has studied perceptions of the Supreme Court has relied on data collected at only one point in time or comparisons of different samples of people at different points in time. One virtue of the approach used in the current study is that it collected data from the same people before and after the Court announced its decision in *Gonzales v. Oregon*. Therefore, we could test for within-participant changes in the perceived legitimacy of the Court. This aspect of our design allowed us to track how individuals reacted over time, which substantially increased our ability to detect changes.

The results of the present study were also more consistent with a particularly hard form of the authority independence hypothesis than with the morality as religiosity or secularization hypotheses. More specifically, the results of the present study indicated that the effects of people's moral beliefs were independent of their religious beliefs. Although these results may seem counter-intuitive, they are consistent with research in moral development that reveals that even young children distinguish between domains that reflect God's authority and those that reflect moral imperatives (Nucci & Turiel, 1978).

Differences in the effects of moral and religious conviction have also emerged in other recent research in patterns that lend further support for the notion that one way in which moral convictions differ from religious convictions is in their relative degree of authority independence. Specifically, in an extension of the current research, we examined whether and how moral and religious convictions related to pre-decision trust in the Supreme Court to make the right decision on a controversial issue of the day. Stronger moral convictions about the issue were associated with greater distrust, whereas stronger religious convictions about the issue were associated with greater trust in the U.S. Supreme Court to get the issue "right" (Wisneski, Lytle, & Skitka, in press). These results suggest that people do not only react to decisions with which they morally disagree. Rather, the morally convicted do not even trust legitimate authorities to make the right decision in the first place, whereas the religiously convicted do.

We now know more than we did before about whether people will sacrifice their personal moral and religious beliefs when they conflict with the positions or decisions of legitimate authorities. Although there are reasons to be concerned about the destructive uses of power and pressures to obey legitimate but malevolent authorities, our results suggest that people are not totally at the mercy of perceived obligations and duty to comply with those in power. Instead, people's compliance with and acceptance of authority decisions hinges to a considerable degree on whether authorities make decisions that citizens perceive to be consistent with their moral or religious views. Although displeasing decisions, even those that are religiously displeasing, tend not to change the extent to which citizens perceive decision-making authorities to be legitimate, our results indicate that morally loaded decisions can enhance or degrade citizens' subsequent appraisals of the authorities' legitimacy.

In conclusion, morality and religiosity work independently to affect perceptions of authorities. Although the religious disliked the Supreme Court's specific decision in *Gonzales v. Oregon*, they did not let their disagreement with the Court's decision undermine their perceptions of the Court's fundamental legitimacy and authority. In contrast, the degree to which people's policy preferences in *Gonzales v. Oregon* were held with moral conviction did carry over to affect their subsequent impression of the Court. The Court's legitimacy was enhanced or eroded as a function of whether its decision was consistent or inconsistent with perceivers' morally held policy preferences. Future research is needed to explore how long lasting these effects might be and whether faith in the Court can be restored when it makes subsequent judgments that the morally disillusioned perceive as "getting it right."

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Correction to Logel et al. (2009)

In the article “Interacting With Sexist Men Triggers Social Identity Threat Among Female Engineers” by Christine Logel, Gregory M. Walton, Steven J. Spencer, Emma C. Iserman, William von Hippel, and Amy E. Bell (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2009, Vol. 96, No. 6, pp. 1089–1103), the affiliation for William von Hippel is incorrect. The affiliation should have been University of Queensland.

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