Moral Courage and Moral Disregard: Different Sides of the Same Coin?

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The goal of this chapter is to describe how the same act can be perceived as morally courageous on the one hand, and as evil on the other. The authors content that both moral courage and moral disregard could be driven by two sides of the same process. Strong moral conviction that a stance is right or wrong (i.e., moral or immoral) may make it easier to disengage from normative standards to serve that belief, including harming others for a perceived higher moral purpose. In turn, the consequences of disengaging from normative standards could be perceived as heroic by like-minded observers or as morally bankrupt by non-like-minded observers (e.g., violence incited by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may be perceived as heroic by observers who believe that it serves a higher moral purpose or as deeply immoral by people on the other side of the conflict who do not share that moral conviction).

World War II was the most lethal conflict in human history, involving nearly every country on the globe (Weinberg, 2005). Although the war ended nearly 75 years ago, perceptions about the moral roles that nations played in the war continue to shape politics today: Who were, and still are, the moral heroes and villains on the international stage? Interestingly, there is no universal consensus about the moral heroes and villains of World War II. For example, although people in Western countries tend to perceive the U.S.'s involvement in the Allies' war effort as heroic, some Eastern Europeans (i.e., Belarussians) perceive the U.S.'s role as villainous (perhaps reflecting ongoing tension between the U.S. and Russia/Russian satellites; Giner-Sorolla et al., under review). One reason why there is no clear consensus about the moral role of the U.S., for example, may be because the Allies committed actions that could be perceived as morally heroic *or* atrocious, depending on perceivers' points of view.

For example, one could perceive the Allies as heroic because they bravely took a stand against some of the most tyrannical and dangerous dictators the world has ever seen. However, a completely heroic view of Allied history is undoubtedly myopic, given that other perceivers could point out that the Allies committed acts that could also be construed as gruesome wartime atrocities or crimes. The United States, for example, dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Within seconds of detonation, the bombs leveled two city centers and instantly killed any civilian within a mile of ground zero. Others died of radiation sickness in the days, weeks, and even months that followed, contributing to a total death count of at least 130,000, most of whom were civilians. Although some historians argue that dropping the bombs saved many lives that would have been lost if the war continued longer (e.g., Frank, 1999), other historians argue the outcome of the war at that juncture in the Allies' favor was inevitable, making the use of the bombs unjustifiable, immoral, and a possible war crime (Selden & Selden, 2015). Similarly, observers could point out that the U.S.' involvement in the firebombing of Dresden, Tokyo, and other Japanese cities was morally reprehensible, given the

devastating consequences of the attacks for human life, especially because many or most of the dead were civilians (Grayling, 2006).

The goal of this chapter is to reconcile how these two extremes of moral behavior can occur simultaneously. How could Allied military leaders display—seemingly concurrently—extraordinary moral courage *and* deep moral disregard? We contend that both moral courage and moral disregard could be driven by two sides of the same process: Strong moral conviction that a stance is right or wrong—i.e., moral or immoral—may make it easier to disengage from normative standards to serve that belief. In turn, the consequences of disengaging from normative standards could be perceived as heroic (e.g., exceptional bravery when risking one's life for a higher moral purpose), or as morally bankrupt (e.g., willingness to break the law or hurt others to serve a perceived "higher moral purpose"). Ultimately, we suggest that judgments of whether an act involves moral heroism or moral poverty are subjective and in the eye of the beholder: People who disengage from normative standards are perceived as heroic by observers who share an agent's moral conviction, and deplorable by observers who disagree with that moral viewpoint. This process could contribute to disagreement about who the moral heroes and villains are in any conflict. Before exploring this new theoretical position, however, we first briefly review theory and research on moral disengagement and moral convictions.

Moral Disengagement

People generally act in line with their moral standards. However, the inhibition of immoral impulses is an active process that requires self-regulation and effort; that is, self-regulatory mechanisms do not serve as internal regulators of moral behavior unless people choose to activate them. When people choose to stop self-regulating, they are said to be *disengaged from moral standards* (or, *morally disengaged* for short; Bandura, 1999).

When might people decide to disengage from their moral standards? Given that people experience self-condemnation when they disobey their own moral standards, they need compelling justification to negate any self-condemnation they typically feel. Bandura (1999) theorized that there are several justifications that allow people to feel like they are "off the hook" for disengaging from their moral standards. They can (1) reconstrue immoral behavior in a positively biased way, so that it no longer is perceived as immoral; (2) use euphemistic language to label transgressions as something less serious than they actually are; (3) highlight how their transgressions pale in comparison to the atrocities committed by others; (4) deny the harmful consequences of immoral actions; and/or (5) perceive victims of immoral action as deserving of poor treatment, or as blameworthy for poor treatment. We elaborate on each of these justifications below.

Reconstruing Immoral Behavior

People may feel personally and socially entitled to transgress because they perceive that immoral behavior is required to achieve a higher moral purpose. To the extent that a transgression serves a noble cause, people may cognitively reconstrue that behavior to be a moral imperative. When that cognitive reconstruction process occurs after transgressing, people no longer see themselves as immoral and worthy of condemnation; they see themselves as agents of morality who are acting in the service of the greater good. Perhaps the best illustration of this process at work is in military conduct: To justify wartime violence, the military see themselves as, "…fighting against ruthless oppressors, protecting their cherished values, preserving world peace, saving humanity from subjugation, or honoring their country's commitments…given people's dexterous facility for justifying violent means, all kinds of inhumanities get clothed in moral wrappings" (Bandura, 1999, p. 195). In short, people seem to be skilled at creatively

reframing their immoral behaviors (e.g., killing, bombing, attacking opponents) as supportive of a greater moral purpose (e.g., protecting the free world, fighting the good fight).

Cloaking Immoral Action in Euphemisms

People may also feel comfortable suspending their normal moral standards because they use sanitizing language or euphemisms to soften the blow of their immoral actions. Atrocities are cloaked in language that hides their true repugnancy (e.g., saying that soldiers "waste" wartime enemies instead of using the more accurate terms "kill" or "murder"). The consequences of such sanitizing language are severe. Besides making transgressions more personally and socially acceptable (Bandura, 1999), people are more vicious when aggressions are framed in euphemistic (vs. accurate) language (Diener, Dineen, Endresen, Beaman, & Fraser, 1975): for example, when people's physical aggression is framed as being part of a "game," they are crueler than when their actions are labeled "aggressive" (Diener et al., 1975). Euphemistic labeling not only justifies immoral action, it can exacerbate and sustain it.

Comparing One's Transgressions to an Even Greater Villain

Another way that people feel like they are entitled to transgress is by comparing their own immoral behavior to that of an even greater villain. By contrasting one's own actions against another person or group's extreme atrocities, transgressions may seem negligible or even upstanding. For example, even terrorists can perceive themselves to be righteous martyrs when they consider how their actions compare to the transgressions that their own people may have suffered at the hands of others. This comparison process also explains why people justify their own transgressions by appealing to even greater villains in history: by highlighting a villainous group or figure from the past, people are able to believe that their present transgressions are justified or even righteous by comparison (Bandura, 1999).

Denying Harmful Consequences

People may also feel comfortable suspending their typical moral standards when they deny that their immoral actions have impactful, harmful consequences. To avoid self or public censure, people may ignore, minimize, or discredit information suggesting that their actions hurt others (Bandura, 1999). This denial process appears to be easier when people do not see the consequences of their actions firsthand. For instance, faceless warfare, in which people aggress against opponents remotely rather than in face-to-face combat, may facilitate disengagement from usual moral standards to not harm others (Bandura, 2011; Milgram, 1974; Royakkers & Van Est, 2010; Tilker, 1970). In the case of faceless warfare, the consequences of people's actions are out of sight and out of mind and therefore easier to discount.

Dehumanization

Perhaps the easiest way to deny the harmful consequences of one's actions is to dehumanize the enemy: to strip them of their human qualities (i.e., personal identity and connection to others) and to cast them as subhuman. When the targets of action are dehumanized, agents are indifferent to their suffering. Indeed, it is easy to ignore any potential harm that comes to the dehumanized (for a review, see Haslam, 2006). Perceiving one's enemies as subhuman facilitates the denial that one's actions are harmful and morally reprehensible, and propels people to more strongly support retaliatory action in the context of real intergroup violence (e.g., the Boston Marathon bombings; Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill, 2015).

Summary

Taken together, there are many different tactics that people use to license their moral disengagement. In turn, these justifications are theorized to lead to the perpetration of inhumanities (see Bandura, 1999 for a full discussion). To be sure, these justifications shed light

on why unspeakable crimes against humanity take place, explaining how ordinary people can convince themselves that truly abhorrent actions are justified (e.g., why Nazis convinced themselves that it was permissible, or even a moral imperative, to discriminate against, encamp, and murder Jews). Although we fully acknowledge and appreciate the knowledge gained from existing theories of moral disengagement, we posit that there remains a critical, yet unexplored, point of clarification that could help improve our understanding of moral disengagement.

Specifically, it is critical to revisit what it means to support or fail to support a "moral standard." People's use of the term "moral standard" could refer to *normative* standards—i.e., what society and culture deem as right or convention in a given context, but that in another context might be inappropriate. For example, it is "wrong" to wear a bathing suit to a dissertation defense, even if it is perfectly "right" to wear one to the beach. But people's use of the term "moral standard" could also refer to *personal* moral standards—i.e., beliefs about right or wrong that transcend context. For example, someone might believe that abortion is wrong, a belief that generalizes across time, context, and group boundaries. The distinction between what is normative versus imperative is not trivial: People readily perceive a psychological distinction between domains of normative standards and personal morality (Turiel, 1983), and each of these domains of social life are associated with unique perceived characteristics. Normative standards are perceived as culturally determined, as well as authority and situation dependent (e.g., the Orthodox Jewish belief that it is unclean for them to eat pork because religious authority and cultural norms say so, but that it is acceptable for other groups to eat pork given that they have different norms). In contrast, personal moral standards are perceived as universally applicable, objectively true, and authority independent (e.g., the belief that female circumcision is objectively wrong, everywhere, regardless of what local norms or authorities deem right). Accordingly, people feel comfortable violating normative standards so long as relevant peers and authority figures condone it, but they firmly uphold their moral attitudes regardless of peers' or authorities' stance on the issue (Aramovich, Lytle, & Skitka, 2012; Skitka, Bauman, & Lytle, 2009; Turiel, 1983).

Although domains of normative standards and personal morality may often coexist without conflict, there are undoubtedly instances when the two domains clash. Do these moments—that is, when people feel they must undermine normative standards to serve a personal moral conviction (e.g., when Americans feel they must harm enemies who threaten their moral conviction to live freely) —capture the essence of Bandura's (1999) construct of moral disengagement? Might the distinction between personal morality and normative standards clarify the apparent paradox of how people morally disengage to transgress for a moral cause that they are seemingly highly engaged with (i.e., see the Reconstruing Immoral Behavior section above)? The Integrated Theory of Moral Conviction (see Skitka, 2010 for a review) is poised from a theoretical standpoint to tackle the paradox of how people who are maximally morally engaged with a specific moral cause may ironically disengage from normative standards of right and wrong to serve that belief, which we turn to next.

Moral Conviction

Moral conviction refers to the recognition that a specific attitude or belief is imbued with moral fervor (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). Although some theories take a top-down approach to studying the psychological content of morality (e.g., implicitly assuming that specific situations trigger concerns with harm and fairness, e.g., Kohlberg, 1975; Turiel, Hildebrandt, & Wainryb, 1991), the moral conviction program of research has taken a different approach by asking whether people see a given issue in moral terms, exploring what leads to this

recognition, and the consequences of seeing various things in a moral light. This approach treats "moral" and "morality" as subjective impressions people have that distinguish some feelings, beliefs, or judgments from others. A perception of moral relevance is something we argue people bring to a given situation, rather than necessarily being an inherent quality of a given situation itself.

Many theorists, in contrast, treat certain issues (e.g., abortion, incest) and dilemmas (e.g., trolley problems—Edmonds, 2013) as if everyone were certain to recognize and agree on the moral essence or fundamental character of the issue or choice. For example, Milgram (1974) interpreted the results of his studies on destructive obedience this way: "When asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources to resist authority." But Milgram never asked whether his participants perceived the choice between defying and obeying the experimenters' requests for obedience as a trade-off between personal morality and obedience; he assumed they did (see Doris, 1998 for a similar critique). We argue that to really know whether people are willing to sacrifice their moral beliefs because of a duty to obey a legitimate authority (as just one example), one first has to know whether people interpret the situation in moral terms. Consistent with this idea, the degree to which people perceive that they have a personal moral stake in a given issue—that is, whether they see their position on a given issue as a reflection of their personal moral convictions—is associated with a number of defining features, and has a wide range of downstream consequences.

Defining Features and Consequences

Attitudes high in moral conviction (or "moral mandates") have a number of defining features and consequences that cannot be explained in terms of other attitude-related characteristics (e.g., attitude extremity, importance, certainty, centrality, or strength of partisanship). Attitudes high in moral conviction are empirically high in perceived objectivism (i.e., they are perceived to be as true as scientific facts), and universal applicability (Morgan, Skitka, & Lytle, under review). Although it is difficult to pin down the direction of causality, perceptions of objectivism, universalism, and moral conviction are deeply connected in people's memory systems, such that when one observes one characteristic, they infer the other features as well (Morgan et al., under review).

Defining consequences. Morally convicted attitudes have the defining characteristic of motivating people to act in accordance with these beliefs, even if it means disobeying authority figures and resisting peer influence. Ultimately, this characteristic could play a role in producing behavior that is disengaged from *normative* standards. For example, people's perceptions of the Supreme Court are shaped by the extent to which Court rulings are compatible with their moral convictions; moral disagreement with the Court's decisions undermines people's perceptions of the Court's fundamental legitimacy and authority (Skitka, Bauman, & Lytle, 2009). People are similarly willing to counter-conform from their peers when they morally disagree with them. When people are informed that their moral mandates were in the minority, they are actually more willing to engage in activism than when they are told they are in the majority; rather than distancing themselves from an unpopular attitude, they more firmly commit themselves to it (Hornsey, Majkut, Terry, & McKimmie, 2003; Hornsey, Smith, & Begg, 2007).

Most relevant to the current argument is that people with strong moral conviction for an issue are more intolerant of attitudinally dissimilar others than people who hold a strong but non-moral attitude toward the issue. People with strong moral conviction prefer greater social and physical distance from attitudinally dissimilar others, and they are less cooperative and agreeable

in attitudinally heterogeneous group settings when moral mandates are at stake (Skitka et al., 2005). Their intolerance for the perspectives of others who threaten those moral mandates also make the morally convicted unwilling to compromise (Ginges, Atran, Medin, & Shikaki, 2007; Ryan, 2013; Skitka et al., 2005; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). Moreover, people are willing to behaviorally discriminate against others who do not share their moral beliefs: When asked to divide 10 raffle tickets between themselves and another attitudinally dissimilar person, people who were high (vs. low) in moral conviction were much more likely to keep most of the tickets for themselves (on average 8.5 tickets) rather than divide them equally (Wright, Cullum, & Schwab, 2008). In short, people with strong moral conviction are intolerant of attitudinally dissimilar others.

People with strong moral conviction for a cause are even willing to accept violence if it serves that higher moral purpose. For example, in the context of a capital punishment trial, participants' moral conviction about defendant guilt or innocence (i.e., that guilty murderers should be punished and the innocent be freed) had a greater impact on perceptions of the trial's procedural and outcome fairness than the actual procedures used. In short, people's strong moral convictions did a better job predicting perceptions of the trial's fairness than whether due process was upheld. Even when the procedures were shockingly unfair and violent (i.e., the defendant was killed by vigilantes), people's perceptions of the procedural and outcome fairness of what happened were still more strongly shaped by their morally vested beliefs about defendant guilt or innocence than they were by whether the procedures used to achieve them were procedurally fair or unfair. Due process was only rated as fairer than vigilante justice among people who had weak moral conviction for defendant guilt or innocence (Skitka & Houston, 2001; see also Bauman & Skitka, 2009; Skitka, 2002; Skitka et al., 2005; Skitka & Mullen, 2002).

Summary

Together, the experience of having a strong (vs. weak) moral conviction, that is, being *maximally (vs. minimally) engaged with a moral conviction*, is associated with a host of consequences: more social and physical distance from attitudinally dissimilar others, greater intolerance of and discrimination against people with alternative viewpoints, and greater tolerance for violence that serves a perceived higher moral purpose. What these behaviors have in common is that they undermine *normative* standards, and that could be consequential for people's willingness to commit atrocities in the name of a moral belief. Outside of the context of a moral conviction, these behaviors would be perceived as inappropriate and maladaptive for society. When people are maximally engaged with a moral conviction, however, they appear willing to shift focus to upholding that personal moral standard, even via means that are perceived as normatively wrong. In short, people who have strong moral conviction for a cause may be willing to normatively transgress to serve that belief.

Moral Disengagement Revisited

Strong moral convictions embolden people to adhere strongly to their beliefs, even if that means they must disobey authority, be intolerant of attitudinally dissimilar others, or accept violent means to achieve a morally convicted end. Although not often framed as such, one could conceptualize these findings as the *disengagement from normative standards* when people are *maximally engaged with specific moral convictions*. In other words, people are ironically most likely to "morally disengage" (normatively) when they are maximally morally engaged (personally). Therefore, in our view, it is possible and instructive to interpret moral disengagement through the lens of moral conviction. In the sections that follow, we discuss how Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement could be understood as the disengagement of

normative standards when people are maximally engaged with an issue-specific moral conviction. We also discuss the implications of this interpretation of moral disengagement, including how such a re-conceptualization could highlight currently unexplored links between moral courage and moral disregard. We finally discuss novel predictions for moral conviction research that are inspired by a moral disengagement perspective. We ultimately aim to illustrate that moral conviction and moral disengagement research could benefit from their theoretical integration, as well as how this integration could help us understand how people could become perpetrators of genocide.

Maximal Engagement with Moral Convictions Leads to Disengagement from Normative Standards

How can Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement be interpreted through the lens of moral conviction? As reviewed above, the morally convicted are skilled at justifying any means necessary to uphold those beliefs; they perceive those means as morally imperative, even if the means themselves are immoral. Therefore, normative disengagement via maximal engagement with moral convictions seems to operate through the reconstrual of immoral behavior. People feel "off the hook" for their normative transgressions when they reconstrue those actions to be a negligible price to pay for a large moral payoff. In fact, Bandura (1999) acknowledged that people feel justified in transgressing because they truly believe they are upholding and protecting their cherished values.

Lost in the original nomenclature of "moral disengagement," however, is the critical idea that such a process nonetheless requires maximal engagement with issue-specific moral convictions. Indeed, people do not morally disengage because they decide to be "bad" and nefarious, or because they no longer care about being "good;" people have a strong need to see themselves as moral (Bandura, 1989; Monin & Jordan, 2009; Steele, 1988, 1999). Instead, they are sometimes forced to ignore normative standards when those standards collide with cherished moral convictions. In such circumstances, people may feel entitled to shirk normative standards to serve a perceived higher moral purpose: their moral convictions. Thus, even if they are disengaged from normative standards, people can still preserve their moral self-integrity by being engaged with their moral convictions.

Although not explicitly tested in the context of moral disengagement, there is existing empirical evidence from the moral conviction program of research that supports our re-conceptualization of moral disengagement. As explained above, to serve their moral convictions, people are willing to: (a) deny the legitimacy of formal laws and authority (Bauman & Skitka, 2009; Mullen & Skitka, 2006; Skitka & Houston, 2001; Skitka & Mullen, 2002); (b) violate social norms (Aramovich et al., 2012; Hornsey et al., 2003, 2007); (c) excuse the lies of corrupt political figures (Mueller & Skitka, 2017); and (d) approve of violence to achieve morally preferred ends (Reifen Tagar, Morgan, Skitka, & Halperin, 2013; Skitka & Houston, 2001) . Thus, it is clear that people are willing to violate some normative standards to serve their moral convictions. Taken further, although it is impossible to ask people to commit extreme atrocities in the service of their moral convictions in laboratory settings, we expect that strong moral convictions could play a motivating role in those situations.

Moral Courage and Moral Disregard: Different Sides of the Same Coin?

If maximal engagement with specific moral convictions entitles people to violate normative standards to serve those beliefs, how are the consequences of such normative disengagement perceived by observers? It is tempting to argue that normative disengagement is always perceived as bad and maladaptive for society. In fact, Bandura's (1999) paper focuses

exclusively on how moral disengagement perpetuates inhumanities. However, impressions of the rightness or wrongness of disengagement from normative standards may vary depending on observers' own moral convictions. If norm disengagement benefits a morally convicted cause, it could be championed as the pinnacle of goodness by people who share that conviction. At the same time, norm disengagement could be castigated as morally bankrupt by others who cannot appreciate that cause. Given that moral convictions are subjective and highly variable between people, it is important to explore how normative disengagement could be perceived by observers as morally heroic *or* morally bankrupt.

To some, morally disengaging from normative standards in the service of a greater moral conviction could be perceived as morally courageous. For instance, American revolutionaries shirked a normative standard (revolting against the British Crown) to serve a greater moral conviction (no taxation without representation). Those revolutionaries are lauded today by Americans as moral exemplars precisely because they undermined British authority and bravely fought for freedom and equality. Similarly, during wartime, soldiers may be applauded for bravery in combat that serves a higher moral end (e.g., protecting the free world), even if combat requires exceptional suspension of the typical standard to not harm others. Regardless of their suspension of normative standards, to citizens who are protected by those soldiers, they are perceived as morally heroic. It is also interesting to consider the reverse scenario: Helpers and rescuers who violate their community's standards by saving and protecting potential victims of war may similarly be celebrated as heroes by observers who agree that it is morally right to save those people. In sum, so long as observers share a strong moral conviction with an agent, that person's disengagement from normative standards to serve that belief appears to be perceived as completely understandable, justified, and laudable.

Taken to the extreme, people's tendency to excuse norm violations when they serve a higher moral purpose could ultimately lead them to license genocide. What is "normative" and what is "morally mandated" is fluid and in the eye of the perceiver (Skitka et al., 2005), including genocide. Killing can be perceived as a shockingly mundane act under some circumstances: specifically, when one thinks that doing so serves a higher order good. The idea that norms that prohibit killing can be overridden by a higher moral purpose has been echoed throughout history. As just one example, a scholar of Nazi Germany noted, "The Final Solution did not develop as evil incarnate but rather as the dark side of ethnic righteousness. Conscience, originally seen to protect the integrity of the individual from the inhumane demands of the group, in the Third Reich became a means of underwriting the attack by the strong against the weak. To Germans caught up in a simulacrum of high moral purpose, purification of racial aliens became a difficult but necessary duty" (Koonz, 2003, p. 273). In short, for Germans in the Third Reich who shared this moral vision, mass genocide of "racial aliens" appears to have been perceived as a justifiable means toward achieving a higher moral end.

Disengagement from normative standards are very likely, however, to be perceived as unjustifiable and grossly immoral to observers who do not share an agent's moral conviction. Contemporary readers are likely to be appalled, for example, at Koonz (2003) depiction of the prevailing mindset in Nazi Germany as one that perceived genocide as a "necessary duty." Most eighteenth century British no doubt viewed American revolutionaries as traitors to the Crown when they took up arms for independence, railing against taxation without representation. Similarly, enemy soldiers and rescuers of enemy targets are unlikely to be perceived as heroes by their opponents but instead are likely to be seen as vermin (e.g., Steuter & Wills, 2010). Thus, an agent who undermines normative standards to serve a moral conviction will not be excused by

observers who fail to share that moral conviction; to those with alternative moral convictions, morally disengaged agents will be perceived as morally bankrupt.

Taken together, we propose that two possible perceived consequences of disengagement from normative standards are moral courage on the one hand, and deep moral disregard on the other. Depending on whether perceivers can appreciate an agent's moral conviction, an agent who violates normative standards will be perceived as morally courageous (when there is congruence between observer and agent moral conviction), or as morally deficient (when there is incongruence between observer and agent moral conviction). To be clear, our theoretical position is meant to be descriptive, not prescriptive. We do not wish to grant people excuses for committing atrocities in the name of a cherished moral conviction. Instead, we wish to clarify why normative disengagement is sometimes perceived as a virtue, and at other times perceived as the epitome of evil. Given the subjective nature of moral convictions, we posit that perceptions of virtue or vice in disengagement from normative standards are also often subjective. To people who agree with that moral conviction, an agent who is willing to go to the extremes for that belief is perceived as a hero. In contrast, to people who disagree with that moral conviction, an agent who violates normative rules of right and wrong for that belief is seen as lacking a moral compass.

Implications of Moral Disengagement for Moral Conviction

Viewing Bandura's (1999) moral disengagement through the lens of moral conviction helps clarify the apparent paradox of how moral disengagement (e.g., murdering one's neighbors) seems to require maximal engagement with a specific moral conviction (e.g., the belief that not killing one's neighbors would threaten everything one holds near and dear), as well as the paradox of how people can seemingly display morally courageous and morally bankrupt behavior at the same time. Importantly, however, there are also several ways that moral conviction research can be enriched by viewing moral convictions through the lens of moral disengagement. If moral disengagement can occur via the denial of harmful consequences of immoral actions (Bandura, 1999), then people may feel comfortable transgressing in the name of their moral convictions through similar mechanisms. Based on this idea, an interesting avenue for future moral conviction research would be to explore the extent to which people ignore, minimize, or discredit information suggesting that their actions hurt others. If people disengage from normative standards to serve their strong moral convictions, they (and morally convicted perceivers) should overestimate the extent to which those actions serve the greater good and underestimate the extent to which those actions hurt others (vs. weakly morally convicted perceivers).

Similarly, Bandura's (1999) theory suggests that to be able to uphold their moral convictions in sometimes anti-social ways, the morally convicted may dehumanize the targets of their actions (i.e., those with different moral viewpoints). That is, people with alternative viewpoints may be at high risk for being dehumanized by the morally convicted. An interesting extension of this logic is that it may be possible to "turn off" the negative consequences of moral convictions (i.e., distance from, and intolerance of attitudinally dissimilar others) when moral opponents are humanized. Extant research provides some clues about strategies to humanize others, even outgroups that are initially perceived with disdain. For example, the process of individuation, that is, attending to a person's unique characteristics (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990), seems to lead people to rehumanize even extreme outgroup members (Harris & Fiske, 2007; Swencionis & Fiske, 2014). Relatedly, empathy, defined as imagining the perspective of another person, is another strategy that could attenuate dehumanization (Halpern & Weinstein, 2004).

Building on these ideas, a potentially efficacious way to experimentally induce individuation and empathy processes could be to implement the fast friends procedure (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997), in which partners take turns answering a series of questions that progressively prompt greater self-disclosure, and presumably, greater individuation of and empathy for partners. The fast friends procedure could in theory be developed to handle gaining an increased awareness of not only individuals, but groups of people who might come together to learn more about each other (see for example, the efforts of civilpolitics.org, and similar organizations). In sum, future research should clarify the mechanisms through which people may be able to rehumanize their moral enemies.

Conclusion

The Allied forces may have concurrently shown extraordinary moral courage *and* deep moral disregard during World War II because those two phenomena could be driven by the same process: Maximal engagement with a moral conviction (i.e., that it was imperative to thwart authoritarian regimes of the Axis) may have led the Allies to ironically disengage from normative standards (e.g., using atomic weapons against Axis enemies and spurring the slaughter of Japanese civilians). In turn, people who shared the Allies' moral conviction perceived their military interventions to be morally courageous, whereas opponents who disagreed with their moral conviction saw those same actions as deeply immoral. Thus, this re-conceptualization of moral disengagement elucidates how people may appear to be both morally courageous *and* morally bankrupt, and relatedly, why observers may disagree about the rightness or wrongness of an agent's disengagement from normative standards.

Beyond World War II, our perspective on moral disengagement could explain why both sides of any conflict believe their own position is right and the other is wrong, even if both parties disregard normative standards to bolster their respective causes. From morally motivated civil disobedience to devastating world wars, it is possible that everyone believes they are fighting the "good" fight, feels entitled to violate normative standards to bolster that cause, and enjoys support and praise from their morally convicted allies for those actions. We may only be held accountable for our disengagement from normative standards by our moral enemies.

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