Without God, everything is permitted? The reciprocal influence of religious and meta-ethical beliefs ☆

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The relation between religious and meta-ethical beliefs is investigated.
- Religiosity and moral subjectivism are negatively correlated.
- Religious priming increases moral objectivism and decreases moral subjectivism.
- Inducing moral subjectivism decreases religious belief.
- Religious and meta-ethical beliefs reciprocally influence each other.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The relation between religious and moral thought has been difficult to unravel because of the multifaceted nature of both religion and morality. We chose to study the belief dimension of religion and the meta-ethics dimension of morality and investigated the relation between God-related thoughts and objectivist/subjectivist morality in three studies. We expected a reciprocal relation between the idea of God and objective morality since God is one prominent way through which objective moral truths could be grounded and thus the lack of such objective truths might imply the absence of God who could set such truths. Study 1 revealed negative correlations between moral subjectivism and several measures of religious belief. Study 2 showed that people adopt moral objectivism more and moral subjectivism less after being implicitly primed with religious words in a sentence unscrambling task. Study 3 showed that people express less confidence about the existence of God after reading a persuasive text about the subjective nature of moral truths. Taken together, the results demonstrate that religious and meta-ethical beliefs are indeed related and can reciprocally influence each other.

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Introduction

Is morality possible without religion? Even if the Godless can do good deeds, on what basis could they justify the moral norms underlying their deeds? It might seem that everything is permitted without God, as Dmitri intimates to Alyosha in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevski, 1880/1990; see also Volkov, 2011).

The relation between morality and religion is complex because both morality and religion are many things at the same time. Religion may refer to a set of beliefs involving supernatural agents (believing), a code of conduct to achieve virtue (behaving), a set of rituals and self-transcendent experiences (bonding), or a sense of belonging to a community of like-minded believers (belonging; Saroglou, 2011). Similarly,

morality may refer to prosocial behavior (an aspect of practical ethics), intuitive and reflective judgments of acts as right, permissible or wrong (normative ethics) or beliefs about the basis on which moral claims can be true or justified (meta-ethics). The research reported in this article investigates the reciprocal influence of religious and meta-ethical beliefs experimentally and asks two specific questions: Does priming religious concepts influence people's meta-ethical beliefs (moving them from subjective to objective morality), and does moving people's meta-ethical beliefs either toward objectivity or subjectivity influence their confidence in the existence of God (either increasing or decreasing it)?

Previous research indicated that implicitly or explicitly exposing people to religious concepts (*God*, *sacred*, *spirit*, etc.) influences various morally relevant behaviors. In one of the first studies, Shariff and Norenzayan (2007) demonstrated that making people solve a scrambled sentence task, and implicitly exposing them to religious words in the process, makes them behave more altruistically in a one-shot dictator game. Ahmed and Salas (2011) also found increased prosociality in both a dictator game and a prisoner's dilemma game after religious

priming using a similar scrambled sentence task. Similarly, subliminal priming of religious concepts has been shown to lead to less cheating in an experimental task (Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007), to increased willingness to contribute to charity objectives (Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007), and, in combination with a history of religious donations, to punish unfair offers more in an economic game (McKay, Efferson, Whitehouse, & Fehr, 2011). Most recently, Rand et al. (2014) explicitly exposed parishioners to a religious message by making them read a passage from the Gospels and demonstrated that, the more the passage resonated with them, the more the parishioners cooperated in a subsequent prisoner's dilemma game. Thus, the effect of religious priming on moral behavior has been well-demonstrated. On the other hand, its effect on meta-ethical judgments is, to the best of our knowledge, unexplored.

Investigation of meta-ethical beliefs, or beliefs about whether moral claims are objectively or subjectively true, has been scarce in psychology. In one of the early studies, Nichols and Folds-Bennett (2003; see also Wainryb, Shaw, Langley, Cottam, & Lewis, 2004) demonstrated that 4–6 year old children see moral judgments more objective than personal tastes or conventions. More recently, Goodwin and Darley (2008, 2010, 2012) systematically investigated the predictors of adopting an objectivist or a subjectivist approach to morality. An objectivist approach was defined as the belief that, in a disagreement over a moral issue, at least one side has to be wrong. Although most people see moral claims as more objective than conventions and personal tastes, and almost as objective as scientific facts, judgments of objectivity differ on the basis of the content of the moral disagreement and personal factors. In general, dilemmas involving debates about the wrongness of physical harm elicit more objectivist responses than dilemmas involving debates about the necessity of virtuous behavior (Goodwin & Darley, 2012). Religiosity, and especially seeing divine authority as the basis of moral truths, is positively correlated with objectivist morality (Goodwin & Darley, 2008; see also Piazza & Landy, 2013). Furthermore, subjectivist morality is found to be positively correlated with correct answers on the "five blocks" task (reported in Goodwin & Darley, 2010), a task used to assess a dispositional tendency to think analytically (Toplak & Stanovich, 2002). In studies where meta-ethical beliefs were experimentally manipulated, inducing moral relativism was shown to increase cheating (Rai & Holyoak, 2013) whereas inducing moral realism was shown to increase charitable giving (Young & Durwin, 2013). Again to the best of our knowledge, the effect of objective/subjective morality on religious belief has not been experimentally investigated so far.

As indicated above, the aim of the present research is to investigate the reciprocal influence of religious and meta-ethical beliefs. Study 1 correlationally investigated the relationship between these beliefs. Study 2 manipulated the salience of the concept of religion by presenting either religious or neutral words in a sentence unscrambling task and then measured meta-ethical judgments either by eliciting objectivist or subjectivist responses in six moral dilemmas or by eliciting responses on a meta-ethics questionnaire. Study 3 manipulated meta-ethical beliefs by presenting arguments contrasting moral claims either with highly objective scientific claims or with highly subjective conventions and then measured belief in God by a single question about the participants' confidence in the existence of God. We expected religious priming to boost objective morality while diminishing subjective morality because the existence of God is one way to ground objective moral truths. We also expected the subjective morality manipulation to decrease confidence in the existence of God since the absence of objective moral truths might imply the absence of an entity which could set such truths.

Study 1

Method

Participants

With an estimated correlation coefficient of .20, a 95% power of detecting an effect required a sample of about 320 participants. We

therefore determined the sample size to be no less than 300 and exceeded this minimum as long as there were extra participants available in the setting the data were collected.

Three hundred and fifty-five undergraduates (mean age = 21.0, $SD = 1.98$, 224 females, 113 males, 18 unreported) from Dogus University in Istanbul participated in the study in return for extra course credit. All participants were native Turkish speakers. Two hundred and eighty-eight participants indicated identification with Islam. Of the remaining 67 participants, 10 identified themselves as atheists, 34 as theists without any organized religion, 13 as believers in a religion other than Islam and 10 declined to answer.

Materials and procedure

Data were collected in a classroom setting with groups of 50–60. The students responded to the Turkish translations of the ethics position questionnaire's 10-item relativism subscale ($\alpha = .89$; Forsyth, 1980) as a measure of subjective morality. In addition, they responded to the Turkish adaptation of the 5-item intuitive religious belief scale ($\alpha = .89$, IRBS; Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012), Turkish translation of the 10-item intrinsic religiosity scale ($\alpha = .78$, IRS; Hoge, 1972), and a single question about confidence in the existence of God (EG; see online Supplementary materials (SM)).

Results and discussion

As expected, moral subjectivism was negatively correlated with all measures of religious belief, $r = -.26$, $p < .001$ for IRBS; $r = -.36$, $p < .001$ for IRS; and $r = -.14$, $p = .01$ for EG. When we controlled for age, socio-economic status, political orientation, gender, and degree of education, the results remained constant (all r's > −.138, all p's < .016). Also, all three religious belief measures were positively correlated with each other (all r's > .44, all p's < .001). As in previous studies (e.g., Goodwin & Darley, 2008), people with strong religious beliefs thought that objective moral principles do exist. In Studies 2 and 3, we investigated the causal relationship between religious and meta-ethical beliefs.

Study 2

Method

Participants

In Study 2, we estimated a medium effect (f) of .3, which required a total sample of about 90 with 80% power of detecting any effect. We therefore determined the sample size to be no less than 40 per experimental condition and exceeded this minimum as long as there were extra participants available in the setting the data were collected.

One-hundred undergraduates participated in Study 2 for extra course credit. Three participants (two in the Religious-prime, one in the Neutral-prime conditions) were excluded from the analyses because they failed to follow the instructions while solving the scrambled sentence task. The remaining sample of 97 participants (mean age = 21.83, $SD = 3.25$, 67 females, 27 males, 3 unreported) was randomly assigned to the Religious-prime ($n = 47$) or the Neutral-prime ($n = 50$) condition. All participants were native Turkish speakers. Seventy-nine participants reported identification with Islam. Of the remaining 18 participants, seven identified themselves as atheists, nine as theists with no affiliation with any organized religion, and two declined to answer. Although seven participants from the Religious-prime group indicated awareness of the religious prime words, no one indicated awareness about the study's objectives or hypothesis. Since excluding these seven participants had no effect on the final results, we included them in the analyses below.