



# Social geometry and the success of moral ideas: The case of capital punishment<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Black (1979, 2000a,b, 2002a,b) argues that the success of an idea depends on its social geometry. We extend Black's theory of ideas to include moral ideas — statements about the nature of right and wrong. To do so, we focus on former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall's hypothesis regarding death penalty opinions: If Americans were fully informed about the problems surrounding capital punishment they would become opposed to the sanction. Marshall's prediction seems to be supported by college classroom experiments in which students' support for the death penalty plummets after taking a course on the topic. But existing experiments have a curious methodological feature — the professors were “forthright” about their personal opposition to capital punishment. By injecting a moral idea into the experiment — the death penalty is wrong — the professors created a conundrum: Did students turn against the death penalty because information about the problematic nature of capital punishment was compelling, or because they gravitated toward a moral idea espoused by a close superior? The findings from our neutral college classroom experiment support the latter interpretation.

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## 1. Introduction

Social life is filled with moral ideas. From the profound issues of our time to the routines of daily life, moral ideas abound. Detainees should not be held indefinitely or tortured in the war on terrorism. Ex-felons should be allowed to vote. School-sponsored prayer should be permitted before high school athletic contests. Abortion should be outlawed. Gay marriage should be legal. Texting during a face-to-face conversation is rude. Being late to a meeting demonstrates a lack of consideration for others. Such moral ideas are promulgated in private and public spaces, including the family dinner table, churches, coffee shops, boardrooms, and college classrooms.

The success of ideas — the extent to which they are defined as true and important — exhibits enormous variation (Black, 1979:158). Most ideas die quickly never to be resurrected, some ideas attract a small number of adherents for a brief period of time, and a few ideas attract millions of adherents over the ages. Which ideas succeed? Common sense suggests that content is crucial — logic and evidence carry the day. But Black (1979, 1993, 2000a, 2002a) offers a different answer: Holding content constant, the success of an idea depends on its social geometry. Extending Black's theory of ideas (statements about the nature of reality), we argue that social geometry also explains the success of moral ideas (statements about the nature of right and wrong).

In Black's paradigm of pure sociology, social geometry refers to locations, directions, and distances in social space (1979, 1993, 1995, 2000a,b, 2002a,b). The social geometry of an idea is a function of the status of the source, the status of the audience, and the relationship between the source and audience.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Black argues that ideas traveling downward in social space (from a higher status source to a lower status audience) among intimates (the source and audience are relationally close) are the most apt to succeed. Conversely, ideas traveling upward in social space among strangers are the least apt to succeed (Black, 1979, 1993, 2000a, 2002a). If, for example, a corporate CEO presents a moral idea to his long-time assistant — corporations should be allowed to contribute unlimited amounts of money to campaigns because political spending is a form of protected speech — and the long-time assistant then presents the same idea to the new CFO, the former is more likely to succeed. Similarly, if a university Chancellor presents a moral idea to her long-time friend and Dean of the law school — the law school should use affirmative action to increase the diversity of the student body — and the Dean then presents the same idea to a new member of the board of trustees, the former is more likely to succeed. Of course, if the assistant/Dean mentions that the CEO/Chancellor originally proposed the idea then the chance of success improves dramatically. Again, Black's theoretical proposition does not imply that the content of an idea is irrelevant. But hold content constant and success depends on who presents the idea to whom (Black, 2000a: 349).

To explore the influence of social geometry on the success of a moral idea, we treat the Marshall hypothesis as a case study. In the landmark 1972 case of *Furman v. Georgia*, former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall argued that if Americans were fully informed about the problems surrounding capital punishment — the death penalty is an expensive sanction imposed in an arbitrary manner that occasionally executes innocent defendants yet provides no greater deterrence than life imprisonment — then most would become opposed. Marshall noted that retributivists who believe in “an eye for an eye” would be the exception to the rule, as information would not be persuasive.

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<sup>1</sup>The social geometry of an idea also includes the social location of the subject, an element of the theory that is not relevant here (Black, 2000a: 348).

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