



# Who's holding the moral higher ground: Religiosity and the vertical conception of morality



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## ABSTRACT

Across languages, “morality” is associated with “up” and “immorality” with “down”. The relationship between morality and verticality found in linguistic metaphors can also be found in people’s non-linguistic mental representations of morality. However, recent lines of work have demonstrated that personality differences may moderate the embodied effect of moral concepts on a vertical dimension. Based on these findings, we predicted that, by virtue of its facilitating role in encouraging moral thinking and behavior, religiosity may contribute to a stronger embodied effect of moral concepts. We found convergent support for this hypothesis across two studies using correlational (Study 1) and experimental data (Study 2). The findings suggest that there are individual differences in the metaphorical representation of moral concepts.

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## 1. Introduction

According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, people tend to rely on concrete experiences to understand abstract concepts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For instance, cognitive science has shown that morality is a metaphorically constituted conception, understood relative to concepts like purity, color and brightness. Across many languages, “purity” is associated with morality, and “dirtiness” with immorality, which is evident in positive and negative idioms like *pure spirit* and *dirty money*. In the past few decades, there has been ample evidence for a close link between our use of moral metaphors and our representation of morality (Johnson, 1993; Lee & Schwarz, 2010; Rozin & Nemeroff, 1990; Schnall, Benton, & Harvey, 2008). For instance, Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) devised a series of experiments to investigate the conceptual correspondences between cleanliness and morality. Based on the observations that physical cleansing has been a critical component in religious ceremonies for centuries, it was hypothesized that there might be a psychological association between bodily purity and moral purity. As predicted, the results showed that physical cleansing alleviate the upsetting consequences of unethical behavior and restored one’s moral self-image. Conversely, challenges to one’s moral integrity increase the appeal of physical cleansing. Thus, this pattern of results

suggests that the association between bodily purity and moral purity is cognitively real.

As Lakoff and Johnson (1999) argue, “virtually all of our abstract moral concepts are structured metaphorically” (p. 209). In addition to cleanliness, people also use spatial concepts to think and talk about morality (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Lakens, 2012; Yu, 2016). Chinese, for example, employs the vertical scale on which morality is associated with high and immorality with low respectively as instantiated in the contrasting metaphors “高尚 (lit. high-esteem)” and “低劣 (lit. low-vulgar)” (Yu, 2015). The systematicity and coherence of the spatial metaphors for morality in language have given rise to research investigating the psychological reality of these metaphors. In a seminal study conducted by Meier and Robinson (2004) investigating the relationship between morality and verticality, participants were asked to evaluate words with a positive or negative meaning. Based on the assumption that morality is associated with up and immorality with down in spoken metaphors, it was hypothesized that participants would respond more quickly when the positive words appear in a high vertical position, whereas participants would respond more quickly when the negative words appear in a low vertical position. As predicted, the results showed that participants tended to implicitly associate morality and vertical space according to the metaphorical mappings, providing further evidence for the psychological reality of vertical metaphor for morality.

While the findings in Meier and Robinson’s (2004) study were intriguing, some grew skeptical of the conclusions as the results can only be partially replicated in subsequent research on moral cognition.

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Hill and Lapsley (2009) replicated Meier and Robinson's (2004) implicit association task but obtained some divergent results. They only found a facilitating effect when immoral personality words were lower in the visual field rather than higher in the visual field, suggesting that only immoral traits are represented metaphorically. However, it should be noted that stimuli in Hill and Lapsley (2009) differ from those in Meier and Robinson's (2004). Specifically, the former focused solely on moral and immoral personality traits (i.e., truthful, trustworthy, and dishonest), while the latter included words related to moral concepts and actions (i.e., nurture, adultery, and molest). As a result of different stimuli used for these two studies, the failure to replicate was puzzling.

Counter to Hill and Lapsley's (2009) findings, Lakens (2012) found in his studies on vertical representation of morality that participants processed the + polar association (e.g. moral, up) faster than – polar association (e.g. immoral, down), suggesting a basic asymmetry in the way that individuals process vertical metaphors for morality. More recently, Wang, Lu, and Lu (2016) replicated the study of Meier and colleagues in a Chinese sample and found similar effects for moral and immoral words with respect to verticality. Additionally, to reveal the asymmetry between “moral-up” and “immoral-down”, they investigated the time course of the spatial representation of morality by analyzing the N1, P2, and LPC components. The ERP data showed that ‘moral-up’ association had an earlier effect than the ‘immoral-down’ association. Concretely, ‘moral-up’ association exerted an effect on the amplitudes of the N1, P2, and late positive-going potential during the processing of moral words, whereas the ‘immoral-down’ association only exerted an effect on the amplitudes of the late positive-going potential induced during the processing of immoral words, suggesting a difference in the time course between the two poles of moral metaphors on a vertical dimension, namely, “moral-up first, immoral-down last”.

While spatial schemas may exert an important influence on the representation of morality, there are factors beyond the control of the experimenters that play a role in the spatialization of morality. In an innovative study, Meier, Sellbom, and Wygant (2007) investigated the link between personality differences and morality. Reasoning that psychopaths are usually deficit in processing affective stimuli, Meier et al. (2007) predicted that moral concern of the participants would moderate the vertical representation of moral concepts. Consistent with this prediction, they found that participants high in psychopathy did not use verticality as a cue when encoding moral-related concepts like their low-in-psychopathy counterparts, suggesting that there might be scalability of the vertical conception of morality.

In contrast to those individuals with little concern of morality, anecdotal evidence and experiment research have shown that all else being equal, religious people will prove more moral than atheists. In a national survey of African American, Ellison (1992) found that respondents engaging in frequent faith practices were viewed as friendlier than their less-religious counterparts, suggesting that religion serves as an important source of moral guidance. For instance, many committed Christians recognize a moral imperative to share with others the good feelings and positive life changes. In addition to these self-report or peer-ratings measures, recent lines of empirical research provided further evidence substantiating the claim that religious beliefs play a role in facilitating moral behavior (Ahmed & Salas, 2008; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011). In an anonymous economic game, participants were given ten dollars and told that they could keep or share as much of it as they would like with a second player, whom they never met. The results showed that control participants kept all or most of the money for themselves. By contrast, participants primed with religious concepts were more likely to share their money with other people than controlled participants, suggesting that religious priming can encourage more moral behavior (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Building on prior work on the link between religion and morality, Pichon, Boccato, and Saroglou (2007) sought to investigate whether the sublime exposure to religious concepts may exert an effect on people's moral behavior. They found that

positive priming increases the accessibility of morality-related words (e.g. “help”, “sympathy”), suggesting that religious concepts can even unconsciously activate moral behavioral schema. It should be noted, however, some researchers provided critiques that many studies in fact failed to provide supporting evidence for the positive link between religiosity and moral behaviors (Bellemare & Kröger, 2007). For instance, Decety et al. (2015) found that children in religious households showed more selfishness than children from non-religious families, suggesting a negative association between religiousness and children's altruism. Yet, as Saleam and Moustafa (2016: 3) noted, “religion seems to make people more prosocial in some instances, and more antisocial in others”. Galen (2012) provided a comprehensive review of the current research about the relationship between religiosity and morality. Despite no significant differences of morality between religious and irreligious people observed in some studies, he concluded that the evidence appears “fairly conclusive that priming religious concepts activates prosocial behaviors in participants” (ibid: 885).

As discussed, research from the work of social psychology demonstrates that religion is positively related to morality. Moreover, recent lines of research have provided initial evidence that the extent to which people concern about morality influences their vertical representation of morality. Tying these findings together, if moral concern moderates the spatial representation of morality, its effects should be more detectable in religious population or people primed with religious concepts than in the non-religious population. In the present study, we first sought to determine whether religious people were more likely to associate verticality with morality implicitly than atheists (Study 1). We then tested whether religion can play a causal role in influencing vertical conceptualization of morality (Study 2).

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Methods

#### 2.1.1. Participants

Sample sizes varied with the availability of participants. Overall, there were 182. Of the religious participants ( $n = 88$ ), 51 Buddhists came from four different Buddhist temples in a southwestern province of China (average age 34.6 years, range 31–38) and have spent at least 8 years (ranging from 8 to 15, mean = 12.4,  $SD = 3.6$ ) cultivating themselves according to the Buddhist doctrine in their temples. The remaining religious participants were Taoists ( $n = 37$ ) who came from three different Taoist temples in a central province of China (average age 33.5 years, range 30–39). They have also spent at least 8 years (ranging from 8 to 18, mean = 13.1,  $SD = 3.7$ ) cultivating themselves according to the Taoist doctrine in their temples. Due to religious reasons, all the participants were unmarried male. Another 94 age- and education-matched male participants were recruited as control group, with a mean age of 33.8 (ranging from 30 to 40) and college education. To ensure all the control participants were atheists, we applied a screening question before the experiment “do you believe in any religion?” to filter out the religious population. We donated 20 yuan for each Buddhist and Taoist to the temples they lived in, because they cannot get paid due to religious reasons. Each atheist was paid 20 yuan for his time compensation. All participants were native speakers of Chinese.

#### 2.1.2. Materials and procedure

2.1.2.1. *Word stimuli.* 20 words with moral meanings (e.g. “正义”- righteousness) and 20 words with immoral meanings (e.g. “罪恶”-sinfulness) were selected. To avoid any spatial priming effect, none of the words included any Chinese character denoting upward or downward direction, such as “崇高” (lit. “lofty-high”) and “低级” (lit. “low-grade”). All the stimuli were two-character Chinese words. The number of strokes and the word frequency did not differ,  $F_s < 1$ . 15 Chinese speakers (not in either experiment) rated the extent to which each

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