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Moral alchemy: How love changes norms



Rachel W. Magid*, Laura E. Schulz

Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA 02139, USA

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ABSTRACT

We discuss a process by which non-moral concerns (that is concerns agreed to be non-moral within a particular cultural context) can take on moral content. We refer to this phenomenon as *moral alchemy* and suggest that it arises because moral obligations of care entail recursively valuing loved ones' values, thus allowing propositions with no moral weight in themselves to become morally charged. Within this framework, we predict that when people believe a loved one cares about a behavior more than they do themselves, the moral imperative to care about the loved one's interests will raise the value of that behavior, such that people will be more likely to infer that third parties will see the behavior as wrong (Experiment 1) and the behavior itself as more morally important (Experiment 2) than when the same behaviors are considered outside the context of a caring relationship. The current study confirmed these predictions.

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1. Introduction

Moral dilemmas in psychology play a critical role in probing our intuitions and revealing the complexities underlying our moral judgments. In the interest of understanding the foundations of moral reasoning, people have been asked if it is okay to sacrifice one person to save five (e.g., Cikara, Farnsworth, Harris, & Fiske, 2010; Crockett, Clark, Hauser, & Robbins, 2010; Cushman, 2015; Foot, 1967; Mikhail, 2000; Mikhail, 2007), accept stolen goods (Haidt, 2007; Haidt & Graham, 2007) burn, poison, or shock someone (Crockett, Kurth-Nelson, Siegel, Dayan, & Dolan, 2014; Cushman, 2008; Young, Cushman, Hauser, & Saxe, 2007), have sex with siblings or dead chickens (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt, 2001; Haidt, Bjorklund, & Murphy, 2000; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993; Prinz, 2006; Young & Saxe, 2011), smother babies (e.g., Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004), eat dead pets (Wheatley & Haidt, 2005), steal drugs (Kohlberg, 1969), harm the environment (Knobe, 2003; Knobe, 2004; Malle, 2004), smash plates (Piaget, 1932), yank hair (Blair, Marsh, Finger, Blair, & Luo, 2006; Nichols, 2002; Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983), push someone downhill (Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007; Kuhlmeier, Wynn, & Bloom, 2003), and desecrate the flag (Gray, Ward, & Ward, submitted for publication; Haidt et al., 1993). Scenarios like these have revealed surprising subtleties and dissociations in our moral

reasoning. Thanks to such thought experiments, we know that the purview of moral reasoning includes not just considerations of harm and fairness, but considerations of authority, loyalty, and purity (Haidt, 2001; see also Blair, 2009; Blair et al., 2006; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2007; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Shweder & Haidt, 1993; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). We know that judgments of intentionality differ for violations of harm and violations of purity (Young & Saxe, 2011), differentially influence our intuitions about blame and punishment (Cushman, 2008), and change depending on the causal structure of morally significant events (Knobe, 2003; Knobe, 2004; Mikhail, 2000; Mikhail, 2007). Moral thought experiments have furthered our understanding of the early development (e.g., Hamlin & Wynn, 2011; Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2010; Hamlin et al., 2007) and neural bases (Crockett et al., 2010; Decety, Michalska, & Kinzler, 2012; Greene et al., 2004; Young et al., 2007; Young, Camprodon, Hauser, Pascual-Leone, & Saxe, 2010; Young & Dungan, 2012; Young & Saxe, 2008; Young & Saxe, 2011) of moral reasoning, and have launched vigorous debates on the relative contributions of judgments believed to be rapid, automatic, and affective and those believed to be slow, effortful, and cognitive (see Cushman, 2015 for review).

The extent of these contributions to the psychology of moral reasoning is perhaps the more striking because the moral scenarios that enabled them are, prima facie, remote from human psychology. Most of us will live all our lives without encountering anything very like the dilemmas above. We do of course enact decisions which trade off the good of a few against the good of many, engage in sexual behaviors others might deem perverse,

* Corresponding author at: Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 77 Massachusetts Ave, 46-4011 Cambridge, MA 02139, USA.

E-mail address: rwmagid@mit.edu (R.W. Magid).

subordinate the needs of infants to other goals, exploit animals and the environment, engage in economic injustices, commit acts of physical aggression, and behave irreverently and disrespectfully. However, to the degree that we worry about such things, we are generally not worried about what to do but about the fact that we do what we shouldn't; the most disturbing aspect of real-world analogues of these scenarios may be our capacity for indifference (Singer, 1972). As scientists, the thought experiments are satisfying because they reveal the paradoxes and ambiguities lurking beneath our moral certitudes. Arguably however, these scenarios reveal the precarious foundation of our moral convictions while leaving our moral anxieties untouched. This is not to say that people do not also sometimes confront ethical challenges with imagination and courage (a topic of psychological and philosophical inquiry in its own right; Anderson, 1999; Railton, 1986; Singer, 1981) but this too arguably contrasts with the moral quandaries that preoccupy us the rest of the time.

1.1. Moral alchemy

Here we are interested in “the rest of the time”: times when we experience neither moral conviction nor moral complacency, although the stakes (in comparison to the scenarios above) are relatively low. We suggest that the scenarios we *experience* as moral dilemmas do not typically involve questions of intentionality, or pressing conflicts between utilitarian and deontological ends. Rather we believe that many of our everyday moral anxieties center on cases where there is a conflict between our belief in any proposition (including morally neutral ones) and our belief that actions consistent with that proposition will upset someone we love. It is in this sense that love can lead to what we will call *moral alchemy*: caring for others (and indeed the moral obligation to do so) allows propositions with little or no moral weight in themselves to become morally charged. To be very clear, our hypothesis is distinct from the claim that our moral values depend on the values of our close others; many researchers have investigated the degree to which our sense of moral value is affected by moral contagion, or social affiliation (see e.g., Eskine, 2013; Haan, Smith, & Block, 1968; Haidt & Hersh, 2001; Hofmann, Wisneski, Brandt, & Skitka, 2014). Here we are interested in cases where although our own opinion about the actual rightness or wrongness of the behavior may remain unchanged, we nonetheless assign the behavior an elevated moral status.

We will start with a trivial example: the moral status of Pogs. (For those of you who were neither a parent nor child in the 1990's, Pogs are collectible colored disks, originally from bottle caps.) Clearly in the world at large, if someone steps on a Pog, uses one to prop up a table leg, or publically disparages them on national TV, he is morally blameless. He is morally blameless even if he knows that Pogs are valued by millions of school children in his culture. Suppose however, your child comes up to you and says, “Pogs are the best thing ever.” Most of us would be (morally) appalled if you replied, “Pogs are stupid” and snapped a Pog in two.

Of course what is bad in this example is hurting your child's feelings, not hurting Pogs. Nonetheless, we suggest that the effect of moral alchemy is to (locally) change the moral status of Pogs. You cannot disregard them as objects worthy of care and attention without insufficiently valuing your child's values. Critically however, and in contrast to other arbitrary objects that attain moral significance through their association with culturally important moral values (Moll & Schulkin, 2009; Shweder et al., 1997; Turiel, Killen, & Helwig, 1987), Pogs are not valuable because of a symbolic connection to other core values; nor did you reclassify Pogs as agents (as fetuses and non-human animals may be classified; Brandt & Rozin, 2013; Singer, 1995). Pogs did have social-conventional value (for children in the '90's, as a kind of currency)

but that is irrelevant here; assuming Pogs have no social currency in the current era, snapping a Pog in front of your Pog-smitten child is still egregious. All that matters is that you knew he cared about Pogs and you did not take his utilities as your own. Note that this is neither moral contagion nor moral duplicity: you do not adopt your child's attitude of valuing Pogs for their own sake but neither do you merely act “as if” you care about Pogs when you do not. Rather, insofar as, and for as long as, failing to care about Pogs would be hurtful to your child, you represent Pogs as objects worthy of care (e.g., you would likely feel guilty about intentionally destroying a Pog, even in private).

Of course many morally neutral things can take on moral content in specific contexts. Basement stairs for the parents of toddlers, or earthquakes for residents of the Pacific Northwest, can be morally relevant insofar as failures to attend to them appropriately could cause harm (and subsequent guilt). Critically however, stairs and earthquakes don't lose (and may even increase) their moral relevance if the potential victims are indifferent or oblivious to the risk: stairs are intrinsically dangerous to toddlers and earthquakes to Oregonians. Although care for others can make many things, innocuous in themselves, an appropriate target of our moral anxieties, here we reserve the term moral alchemy for transformations of non-moral to moral content that depend solely on others' mental states. Because such transformations require insight into others' unique goals, preferences, values, and beliefs, and because only mental state dependent harms are possible candidates for moral transformation, we believe these are particularly important with respect to moral learning.

Why important? It is after all, uncontroversial that people value idiosyncratic things and that morality requires respecting things that others value. However, we suggest that taken together, these commonplaces of human psychology play a key and under-appreciated role in real life moral dilemmas, moral learning and moral change. Consider a proposition less trivial than “Pogs are the best thing ever.” Consider “Academic achievement is important.” For the sake of argument, let's presume that within a given cultural context, this counts as a value but not a moral one: everyone concerned accepts that mediocre students can be morally unimpeachable. Suppose however, that your parents are among those who care about this (non-moral) value. If you under-achieve in school, rip up your homework, and refuse to study for tests, are those moral transgressions or not?

We would contend that although the proposition “Academic achievement is important” has no moral content, the proposition “My parents value academic achievement” does. Insofar as your parents may find your actions hurtful and disrespectful to them because you did not take their utilities as your own, a moral issue is at stake. The effect is (loosely) analogous to the referential opacity induced by complement structures in language: much as the truth value of “It is raining” is independent of the truth value of “Sally believes ‘It's raining’”, knowing that “My parents care about academic achievement” may have a moral status independent of the moral status of the academic achievement they care about.

We have stressed the importance of close interpersonal relationships. Why should it matter that these interactions occur in the context of loving relationships? Why morally, should it matter, that your child cares about Pogs, or your parents care about academic achievement, if, in the world in general, these are largely matters of indifference? We suggest that this is because moral alchemy is only possible when there is a risk of hurt, harm, and interpersonal conflict. If a proposition has moral content in itself (e.g., the belief that “homosexuality is wrong”) then moral values (fairness, loyalty, autonomy, care, liberty, purity, etc.) apply broadly; if our parents believe homosexuality is wrong, and we are gay, we may be in trouble simply because one set of moral values (e.g., autonomy, liberty) conflicts with another (care, authority,

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