



Discipline and desire: On the relative importance of willpower and purity in signaling virtue[☆]



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ABSTRACT

What does it mean to act virtuously? We examine lay perceptions of virtue, and show that different psychological drivers of virtuous behavior are relevant for different types of actions. When evaluating non-moral virtuous behavior, such as choosing to skip dessert, attributions of virtue depend on perceived *willpower* (i.e., the extent to which someone overcomes temptation in service of acting virtuous). In contrast, when evaluating moral virtuous behavior, such as choosing to be faithful to a spouse, attributions of virtue depend on perceived *purity* (i.e., the extent to which someone lacks temptation to sin and thereby does not need to exert willpower in service of acting virtuously). Study 1 demonstrates that when people describe their own actions, they associate willpower with non-moral virtuous behavior, and purity with moral virtuous behavior. Studies 2 & 3 examine judgments of others and show that as behaviors become moralized, people elevate the importance of purity relative to willpower when ascribing virtue. Finally, Study 4 examines perceptions of those who are “reformed”—having eliminated their previous sinful desires such that they no longer feel tempted. For non-moral behaviors, reformed individuals are seen as strong-willed and thus highly virtuous. However, for moral behaviors, reformed individuals are still seen as somewhat impure, and are judged to be less virtuous than those have never felt tempted by a particular vice. These results underscore how construing behaviors in moral terms shifts what people consider to be virtuous.

“In self-restrained and unrestrained people we approve their principle... since it urges them in the right way and exhorts them to the best course; but their nature seems also to contain another element besides that of rational principle, which combats and resists that principle.”

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics.

What does it mean to be virtuous? Even though virtue is defined as the behaviors and character traits that foster moral excellence, people often ascribe virtue to situations bearing little moral consequences. For instance, people often talk about behaviors that benefit the future self (e.g., eating healthy and exercising) as being virtuous and their antitheses as being sinful, even though many of these behaviors would not be classified as being moral (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2011; Khan & Dhar, 2006, 2007; Kivetz & Keinan, 2006; Milkman, Rogers, & Bazerman, 2008, 2009; Read, Loewenstein, & Kalyanaraman, 1999; Wertenbroch, 1998). Additionally, the term “cheating” is used to describe both violating a commitment to the self (e.g., cheating on a diet) as well as violating a commitment to others (e.g., cheating on a spouse).

There are more than just linguistic similarities across a broad range of behaviors involving self-regulation. As individuals become depleted of mental resources, they become more likely to succumb to both non-moral (e.g., eating unhealthy food, Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999) and immoral temptations (e.g., lying, Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009). Those who fail to exhibit self-control when making non-moral decisions often feel moral emotions such as guilt or shame for indulging (Giner-Sorolla, 2001; Kivetz & Keinan, 2006). Further, just as reducing psychological distance between the self and other increases moral behavior (Batson et al., 2003; Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997; Loewenstein & Small, 2007; Small & Simonsohn, 2008), reducing psychological distance between the present- and future-self increases prudent behavior (Bartels & Rips, 2010; Bartels & Urminsky, 2011; Ernsner-Hersfield, Garton, Ballard, Samanez-Larkin, & Knutson, 2009; Hersfield et al., 2011).

In this paper, we examine lay perceptions of what it means to be virtuous, and show that despite the many similarities, different aspects of virtue are relevant across non-moral (e.g., eating healthy) and moral

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(e.g., being faithful to a spouse) behaviors. We find that when evaluating non-moral behavior, judgments of virtue are based on perceptions of *willpower*, or *self-discipline*: the more an actor exerts willpower in the face of temptation, the more virtuous an actor is seen. Thus, for non-moral behavior, individuals who use willpower to overcome temptation are seen as more virtuous than those who choose a virtuous option because they don't find the vice option appealing. In contrast, we find that when evaluating moral behavior, judgments of virtue are based on perceptions of *purity of character*, or the extent to which someone selects a virtuous option without feeling tempted by a corresponding vice option.¹ As a result, for moral behavior, individuals who overcome temptation are seen as less virtuous than those who do not feel tempted by a vice.

In the following sections, we differentiate between willpower and purity as distinct paths to virtuous behavior, and outline why we expect each path to carry differential signal value across non-moral and moral virtue.

1. Willpower and purity as distinct paths to virtue

What unites all types of virtues is that they represent higher-order values that serve to guide behavior. However, while being virtuous is a function of good behavior, the same behavior may result from different mental processes.

In some cases, behaving virtuous may inherently require willpower or self-discipline. When faced with a tempting alternative, individuals often feel internal conflict between a vice option that provides an immediate hedonic reward and a virtuous option that is in accordance with an individual's higher-order goals and values. Although individuals are often drawn by an immediate reward, they sometimes prefer not to be (Frankfurt, 1971; Jeffrey, 1974). In these cases, individuals may try to exert self-control to resist the allure of the vice option (Kotabe & Hofmann, 2015; Lian, Yam, Ferris, & Brown, 2017). Indeed, the importance of self-control in regulating behavior has been shown across a wide range of decisions that are not overtly moral, such as what food to eat or whether to purchase a luxury product (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010; Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Vohs & Faber, 2007; Vohs & Heatherton, 2000) to highly moral decisions such as whether to lie or cheat (Barnes, Schaubroeck, Huth, & Ghumman, 2011; Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011; Kouchaki & Smith, 2014; Mead et al., 2009; see also Baumeister & Exline, 1999; Fishbach & Woolley, 2015; Monin, Pizarro, & Beer, 2007).

Yet, not all virtuous actions require effort. Those who do not feel conflicted when they act virtuously are able to choose a virtuous option precisely because they are not tempted by a given vice. Whereas individuals who overcome temptation demonstrate willpower, those who are free from temptation and conflict are “pure”—their disinterest for a vice option makes it easy for them to choose a virtuous one.

Note that these two distinct routes to virtue, willpower and purity, are incompatible in any given decision. An individual who is pure and free from temptation does not need to exert self-control to choose a virtuous option. Moreover, someone who needs to exert self-control to act virtuously is not wholly pure: there is something inside of him or her that desires a vice option.

The distinction between willpower and purity dates back to Aristotle (trans. 2011) who argued that individuals who alter their internal desires such that they find it easy to act morally are more virtuous and praiseworthy (see also Foot, 1978). In contrast, Kant, 1998

implies that overcoming temptation to sin provides evidence of moral action, and that praise should not be accredited to those who find it easy to do good deeds.

Recent empirical research has examined signals of willpower (Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011; Stein & Nemeroff, 1995) and purity (Critcher, Inbar, & Pizarro, 2013; Inbar, Pizarro, & Cushman, 2012) separately, showing that both are important when assessing the virtue, or moral character, of others. However, this research has shown conflicting evidence for when purity and willpower are primary. While some research shows that when making a virtuous decision those who are pure are considered to have a stronger moral character (Critcher et al., 2013; Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Salovey, 2003), other research shows the reverse—that individuals who overcome temptation are seen as more moral than ones who do not feel tempted (Starmans & Bloom, 2016).

The present paper presents a simple, organizing principle for when displaying willpower is judged as superior to vs. inferior to displaying purity: willpower is deemed more praiseworthy for decisions when the tempting vice option has little moral relevance, but purity is more praiseworthy when the vice is considered immoral or otherwise anti-social. In the following section we describe the distinction between two classes of vices.

2. Morality and vice

We distinguish between non-moral and moral virtuous behavior, which are often considered one and the same (e.g., Milkman et al., 2009). We define *non-moral virtue/vice decisions* as those in which the vice alternative is considered indulgent or imprudent but not necessarily immoral or anti-social. In the Western world common examples of such vices include eating junk food, watching television, or purchasing luxury goods. The consequences of indulging in a non-moral vice tend to be *intrapersonal* in nature and negatively affect an actor over time. For instance, the more desserts a person eats, the worse their future health will be, and the more someone spends in the present, the less they savings they will have in the future. As a result, knowing that someone desiring a vice of this sort often signals information about their personal tastes but not necessarily their values. For example, knowing a person likes the taste of crème brûlée may tell you that he enjoys rich desserts, but does not directly reveal if he is honest, benevolent, or just. Non-moral vices additionally tend to be more permissible in society, and more normal.

In contrast, we define *moral virtue/vice decisions* as ones in which the vice alternative is considered to be immoral or anti-social in addition to being imprudent. Examples include the desire to lie, cheat, steal, or harm someone's feelings. These vices thereby signal information regarding people's social values (rather than their personal tastes), and are *interpersonal* in nature. Knowing that someone is tempted to harm someone's feelings suggests that the actor puts himself ahead of others. Moreover, because these vices are considered immoral or anti-social they tend to be less permissible in society, and more abnormal.

Table 1 summarizes typical characteristics of vices that are considered non-moral or moral. The main distinction we highlight between them is whether or not the vice is considered immoral or anti-social in and of itself. In the sections below, we outline why we expect individuals assess virtue differently depending on the immorality of the vice alternative in a choice set.

2.1. When vices are non-moral

Much research on self-regulation and choice examines how and when individuals avoid temptation in order to pursue their long-term goals (Loewenstein, Read, & Baumeister, 2003). Individuals often succumb to temptation and select a vice option even when they know that the virtue option is in their best interest in the long run. Indeed, the ability to control one's impulses has been strongly linked to long-term

¹ We use the term purity as it pertains to judgments of an individual's character. A pure character is when a decision maker's inner-state is untainted by sinful desire. This definition is distinct from research on moral violations which uses the term “purity” to pertain to violations concerning divinity, sanctity, and degradation (e.g., Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997).

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