Following one's true self and the sacredness of cultural values

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A B S T R A C T

People seem to share a widespread lay belief that *true selves* are morally good entities. This lay belief has downstream consequences for a variety of domains such as person perception and perceived self-knowledge. The current work examines whether it also has consequences for moral decision-making. We hypothesized that people would make more moral decisions when they were focused on being authentic as opposed to being focused on other decision-making strategies. This hypothesis rests on the idea that if people believe their true selves are morally good, then attempts to follow that true self will make them less willing to behave immorally. Consistent with this hypothesis, four within-subjects studies (total $N = 817$) found that participants reported that they and others would need more money to violate a moral norm if they were focused on trying to be authentic relative to if they were focused on being rational, intuitive, or realistic.

People frequently assume that they (and others) possess a *true* self that represents who they really are inside, regardless of how they outwardly behave (Schlegel & Hicks, 2011). Emerging research suggests that people believe *true* selves not only exist, but are morally good (De Freitas, Cikara, Grossmann, & Schlegel, 2017; Strohminger, Knobe, & Newman, 2017). Despite striking differences across individuals and cultures in other beliefs about the nature and structure of the self (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991), the idea that true selves are good seems pervasive. For example, even people who hold extreme negative views of others (i.e., self-identified misanthropes) agree that true selves are morally good (De Freitas et al., 2017), further suggesting people share a common lay belief that one's authentic self is inherently good.

This lay belief influences how we perceive ourselves (Christy, Seto, Schlegel, Vess, & Hicks, 2016) and others (Christy, Kim, Schlegel, Vess, & Hicks, 2017; De Freitas & Cikara, 2018; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014, 2015; Wojciszke, 2005). For example, when people think about close others who have changed, the valence of those changes predicts whether they are seen as movements towards or away from the true self (Bench, Schlegel, Davis, & Vess, 2015). The current research examines whether this belief also influences moral judgments and decisions, by assessing how people respond to morally-charged scenarios when instructed to *be authentic* compared to alternative instructions. If true selves are conceived of as morally good, then instructions to engage with the true self (i.e., to be authentic), should result in greater adherence to moral virtues than alternative instructions.

1. Study 1

1.1. Method

Participants were 192 undergraduate students from a large public university (91 female, 100 male, 1 transgender, $M_{age} = 18.83$, $SD_{age} = 1.08$; 62% White). We did not conduct power analyses. However, for Studies 1, 2, and 4 we set a target minimum of 150 participants and collected data in one-week increments until this minimum was reached. Our aim was to maximize power within the constraints of lab resources.

1.2. Materials and procedure

1.2.1. Decision strategy manipulation (within-subjects)

Participants were told they would make a series of decisions involving their willingness to engage in certain behaviors and that they would make each decision twice using different strategies (i.e., "How much money would it take for you to do this if you were focused on trying to be authentic/thinking rationally?"). The order of these items was randomized for each trial.

1.2.2. Moral foundations

We used the Moral Foundations Sacredness Scale (MFSS; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009) to assess participant's willingness to violate moral norms within five categories (i.e., Harm, Fairness, In-group Loyalty, Authority, and Purity). Specifically, participants indicated how

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Table 1
Descriptive and test statistics (Study 1).

Domain	Authenticity		Rationality		95% CI				Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD	t	p	LL	UL	
Total MFSS	6.17	0.99	5.91	1.06	6.05	< .001	0.18	0.35	0.25
Harm	6.94	1.26	6.60	1.42	5.78	< .001	0.22	0.46	0.25
Fair	5.96	1.35	5.70	1.30	3.67	< .001	0.12	0.40	0.20
Ingroup	6.55	1.15	6.23	1.14	5.77	< .001	0.21	0.42	0.28
Authority	4.86	1.56	4.81	1.60	0.66	.508	−0.10	0.20	0.03
Purity	6.57	1.15	6.24	1.29	6.30	< .001	0.23	0.44	0.27

much money it would take for them to commit acts that violate each of the five moral foundations (e.g., "Kick a dog in the head, hard" for harm) on a scale from 1 (*$0 - I'd do it for free*) to 8 (*never for any amount of money*). In addition to creating subscales, responses were averaged to form an overall composite.

All primary measures, manipulations, and exclusions are reported in the manuscript. Exploratory measures, administered after the main tasks, as well as information about four additional studies, are available at https://osf.io/fbtrm/?view_only=c9e5b77457d841dfb2d794fa7e34464a.

1.3. Results and discussion

A paired-samples *t*-test showed that the differences between conditions were significant for the overall composite and for all subscales save authority (see Table 1). In each case, participants required more money to violate moral norms when they were focused on being authentic.

In Study 2, we sought to replicate and extend these findings by including an intuition condition. Intuition is a common counterpart to rationality, and this allowed for a more inclusive test of how authenticity and other common decision-making strategies relate to moral judgments.

2. Study 2

2.1. Method

Participants were 167 undergraduate students from a large public university (119 female, 47 male, 1 other; M_{age} = 19.51, SD_{age} = 1.23; 54% White). Eleven participants were excluded from analyses for failing two attention checks.

2.2. Materials and procedure

This study used the same basic procedure, except that participants were told to use *three* different strategies when completing the 20 MFSS items (i.e., "How much money would it take for you to do this if you were focused on being authentic/thinking rationally/trusting your gut?"). Responses were averaged to form the subscale and total composite scores.

2.3. Results and discussion

Repeated-measures ANOVAs revealed a significant effect of strategy on the composite as well as all subscales except authority (see Table 2). A planned Helmert contrast on the composite revealed a significant difference between authenticity and the other strategies, $F(1, 155) = 13.57$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.08$. Nonetheless, follow-up analyses revealed this difference was mostly driven by the difference between the true self and rational thinking conditions as the difference between the true self and intuition strategies did not reach significance.

These results are generally consistent with hypotheses. However, the differences between authenticity and intuition were notably smaller than differences between authenticity and rationality. This may be because participants interpreted the authenticity and intuition instructions similarly; instructions to be authentic might be psychologically equivalent to instructions to be intuitive.

To address this possibility, we explored whether people *think* being authentic is intuitive (*n* = 77). Participants completed the MFSS, but only answered the items once under instructions to be authentic. Afterwards, they indicated the extent to which they had used rational and intuitive processing. Results indicated no significant difference in how rational versus intuitive participants thought they had been, $t(76) = 0.11$, $p = .913$, $d = 0.02$, 95% CI = [−0.30, 0.33] (for a more complete description, see supplementary materials). These findings speak against the idea that people equate authentic and intuitive processing. When instructed to be authentic, people reported using both rational *and* intuitive processes.

Another concern not addressed in the previous studies is that the rational thinking condition drives the previously observed differences by *decreasing* the amount of money needed to violate moral norms. In order to address this concern, Study 3 compared instructions to be authentic versus *realistic*. This provided another strong test of our hypothesis considering that people generally perceive themselves as moral (Aquino & Reed II, 2002), even without explicit reference to the true self.

3. Study 3

3.1. Methods

Participants were 220 American adults recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (89 female, 130 male, 1 not reporting; M_{age} = 33.43, SD_{age} = 9.67; 75% White). We pre-registered this study on AsPredicted.org (http://aspredicted.org/blind.php/?x=sk8bf2). Seven participants were excluded from analyses for failing two attention checks (see pre-registration).

3.2. Materials and procedure

Participants completed the MFSS. For each item, they responded under instructions to be authentic *and* under instructions to realistically estimate how much money they would accept if they were actually confronted with each situation. Responses were averaged to form subscales and a total composite.

3.3. Results and discussion

A paired samples *t*-test indicated a significant difference between conditions on the overall composite and across all the subscales but authority (see Table 3).

While we believe that the patterns observed across Studies 1–3 are due to a tendency to ascribe morally good content to true selves, a plausible alternative explanation is that these effects are driven by self-serving motivations. People may report enhanced moral intentions under instructions to be authentic not because they actually conceive of their authentic selves as morally virtuous, but because they want to