

Role of self-control failure in immoral and unethical actions

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Moral virtue depends on self-control to override immoral impulses, so self-control failure can impair moral action. We discuss three components of self-control and how failure of any component can affect moral behavior. Lack of clear standards and lack of commitment to standards deprives the individual of clear inner guidance. Failure to monitor one's actions, as when self-awareness is low such as due to emotion or alcohol, deprives the individual of the ability to know whether behavior conforms to moral standards. Ego depletion signifies inadequate willpower to make oneself do what is right. Evidence supports these hypotheses but more is needed.

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Introduction

The fact that people follow moral rules presents a challenge to some dominant theories about human nature, ranging from simpler versions of evolutionary theory to the widespread assumption of human rationality. Moral rules often press people to do things that are detrimental to their self-interests, extending even to the most basic goals of survival and reproduction. Most obviously, food and sex are crucial for survival and reproduction, but people have been known to refuse those for moral reasons (e.g., moral commitments to vegetarianism or to marital fidelity). In more extreme examples, morality has obligated people to risk and even sacrifice their lives, or those of their offspring. Why did people evolve into moral beings, if that required overcoming impulses to act in ways that would increase reproduction? The answer is almost certainly that moral action would in most cases improve survival and reproduction via other, more roundabout routes — especially acceptance into social groups, including cultural societies. Humans who live alone in the natural environment have vastly reduced chances for both survival and reproduction, as compared to those who

belong to social groups. Securing and maintaining acceptance into a social group has long been vital for human success. Crucially, most human groups have some shared understanding of moral principles, and individuals who routinely violate these rules risk being expelled from the group.

Human beings may have a moral conscience, but they also have the more basic impulses to do what brings immediate benefit. Hence performing morally virtuous actions typically requires the person to overcome these selfish inclinations. Self-control is what enables people to override impulses and responses so as to do something else, especially something that is more highly valued. Self-control is thus vital for morality, because it is the inner process that enables people to resist impulses and overcome selfishness so as to act in morally desirable ways. In an important sense, self-control is the psychological foundation of virtuous action, and morality would be ineffective without it. As indicators of the relationship, low trait self-control has been implicated as the centrally important trait for understanding criminal behavior [1^{••}], and children with low self-control grow up to have a higher likelihood of being arrested for crimes, as compared to other children with better self-control [2^{••}]. The present brief article will examine the link between morality and self-control, with an emphasis on how failures of self-control can promote immoral actions.

The process of self-control has been analyzed as requiring three factors [3,4[•]]. Deficiencies or problems for any of the three can undermine self-control and bring about failure. The three factors are commitment to standards, monitoring of relevant behavior, and the capacity to change. We shall examine each of these in turn.

Commitment to standards

Standards are ideas (concepts) about how one should or should not act. Morality consists of many standards, often in the form of rules about how to behave. Many moral rules consist precisely of forbidding behaviors that may appeal to people in the short run but are detrimental to group living. For example, the Judeo-Christian list of the Ten Commandments (also respected in Islam, with some adjustments) largely prohibits behaviors that undermine group harmony: murder, theft, lying, adultery, disrespect to elders and to shared religious practices, and so forth. People may be tempted to perform such actions, but in order to remain in good standing in society, they need to override those impulses so as to act properly. Indeed, medieval Christianity's roster of Seven Deadly Sins has even more obvious links to self-control, as many of the

actions it condemns would today be immediately recognized by secular persons as self-control failures (gluttony, laziness, lust, greed, pride, anger, lust; see [5**]).

Immoral action can result from two sorts of failures with respect to standards. One arises when people experience conflict between different standards. Many moral dilemmas are based precisely on such conflicts. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, struggles over competing moral injunctions to refrain from killing and to avenge his father's murder. More recently, the much studied trolley problem (e.g., [6]) confronts people with the competing moral obligations to refrain from killing and to save lives (insofar as multiple lives can only be saved by killing one person).

The other problem with standards that can lead to moral failure would be lack of commitment to the standard. The mere existence of standards will not motivate behavior among people who lack a commitment to upholding those standards. The lack of relevant standards renders self-control seemingly unnecessary. For example, much self-sacrificing, prosocial action depends on empathic connections to others, and when empathy is low, such actions are diminished [7,8]. Psychopaths, in particular, lack empathic concern for others, and so they do not mind doing harmful things that most other people would feel guilty about — hence they perform many more destructive, criminal, and otherwise immoral acts [9,10].

Monitoring

Self-awareness research established early on that people are not simply aware of themselves the way they might notice a tree or clouds. Rather, self-awareness typically involves comparison of self to various standards and ideals, including moral standards [11]. Later work built on this insight to argue that the primary function of self-awareness is to make self-regulation possible [12].

For present purposes, the key point is that failure to monitor one's actions can undermine self-control, thereby contributing to immoral outcomes. Low self-awareness was associated with less moral action right from the earliest studies [11]: Participants conform to salient moral standards more when self-aware than when not self-aware. When standards are not salient and explicit, however, people engage in a form of moral hypocrisy, so they can appear moral to others without actually being moral [13,14]. In particular, they seem to revise their own opinions about what the morally desirable course of action is — in a way that is congenial to how they want to act for self-interested reasons [31]. Conversely, after people perform morally questionable actions, they prefer to avoid being self-aware. Greenberg and Musham [15] found that after expressing views contrary to their personal opinions and values, participants preferred to sit facing away from mirrors rather than toward them. (Participants who

affirmed their values preferred to face the mirrors and see themselves!)

The notion that reducing self-awareness contributes to violent and criminal behavior is supported by other evidence. Alcohol, in particular, has been shown to reduce self-awareness, thereby reducing inhibitions [16], and alcohol intoxication greatly increases the likelihood of aggressive and criminal behavior [17]. In fact, military historians have observed that giving soldiers a dose of alcohol before battle, so as to reduce their self-focused concerns for safety and morality and thereby to increase their aggressiveness, has been standard practice in many military organizations for centuries [18].

Strength for change

The third aspect of self-regulation is the capacity to change oneself. Folk wisdom has long depicted this as requiring willpower, a kind of psychological strength or energy that enables one to resist temptations and push oneself to perform disagreeable (but virtuous) actions. Recent research has converged with folk wisdom to some extent in recognizing the role of energy, such as by showing that the capacity for self-control diminishes temporarily after use, which suggests that some energy resource has become diminished [19*,20*,21*,22*]. The term 'ego depletion' is typically used to describe this state of temporary reduction in self-regulatory resources.

When willpower is low, therefore, virtue suffers and immoral behavior increases. This process can interweave moral and nonmoral behaviors, because willpower can be depleted by acts that lack any moral dimension — thereby leaving the person more prone to perform immoral acts, should the temptation arise while the person is in that state (dubbed ego depletion). Mead *et al.* [23*] depleted people's self-control strength with routine cognitive tasks that had no moral aspect and then found that depleted participants were more likely than others to cheat on a test and thereby effectively steal money from the researchers. A subsequent investigation by Gino *et al.* [24**] showed that ego depletion not only increases the tendency to perform immoral actions — it reduces awareness of morality. Specifically, depleted participants were slower to recognize words from word fragments if the words pertained to morality, which indicates that moral concepts are less mentally accessible during depletion than in the normal, non-depleted state. They also showed that resisting the temptation to perform immoral actions (i.e., to cheat) is itself depleting, so that people who succeed in resisting temptation perform worse on a subsequent test of self-regulation.

Along similar lines, Gailliot *et al.* [32**] showed that ego-depleted persons expressed higher willingness (as compared to non-depleted persons) to perform various unethical acts, including forging a signature, cheating

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