



Approach and avoidance in moral psychology: Evidence for three distinct motivational levels☆



James F. M. Cornwell*, E. Tory Higgins

Columbia University, Department of Psychology, 406 Schermerhorn Hall, 1190 Amsterdam Ave. MC 5501, New York, NY 10027, United States

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ABSTRACT

During the past two decades, the science of motivation has made major advances by going beyond just the traditional division of motivation into approaching pleasure and avoiding pain. Recently, motivation has been applied to the study of human morality, distinguishing between prescriptive (approach) morality on the one hand, and proscriptive (avoidance) morality on the other, representing a significant advance in the field. There has been some tendency, however, to subsume all moral motives under those corresponding to approach and avoidance within morality, as if one could proceed with a “one size fits all” perspective. In this paper, we argue for the unique importance of each of three different moral motive distinctions, and provide empirical evidence to support their distinctiveness. The usefulness of making these distinctions for the case of moral and ethical motivation is discussed.

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1. Introduction

The study of ethics in the context of psychological science has undergone considerable advances over the past two decades, receiving renewed attention from researchers working at myriad levels of analysis. This research has ranged from the processes and neurological correlates of moral judgment (e.g. [Greene & Haidt, 2002](#)) to the development of pro- and anti-social tendencies in infants (e.g. [Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007](#)).

During this same period, research on the science of motivation has similarly advanced, with a variety of different theories of motivation being put forward that broaden and deepen the understanding of motivation beyond the useful, but ultimately too simple, hedonic model of approaching pleasure and avoiding pain. These theories range from deepening the model of approach/avoidance to include behavioral control theories of activation and inhibition ([Carver & White, 1994](#); [Carver & Scheier, 2001](#)) to regulatory focus theories of strategic inclinations ([Higgins, 1997](#); [1998](#)). Other research has expanded on these motives in research on achievement ([Elliot, 1999](#)) and different modes of goal-pursuit ([Kruglanski et al, 2000](#)).

In the last decade, these two lines of research intersected. First, the principles of regulatory focus and regulatory fit were examined in the

context of moral value ([Camacho, Higgins, & Luger, 2003](#)). Later, the overarching principles of approach and avoidance were fleshed out in more detail with respect to moral rules ([Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009](#)). This represents an important advance both in the science of morality and the science of motivation.

However, in contrast to the increased complexity in motivation science, there has been some tendency to subsume all motives under those corresponding to approach and avoidance within morality, namely the prescriptive (approach) and proscriptive (avoidance) systems of moral motivation (cf. [Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013](#)). In developing the intersection of motivation science and moral psychology, these theories may be paying too little attention to important distinctions already established in the wider motivation literature. In particular, the prescriptive/proscriptive distinction at times not only aims to account for the intersection of morality with approach and avoidance motives, but also the intersection of morality with the regulatory focus motives of promotion and prevention and the intersection of morality with the control theory motives of behavioral activation and inhibition. The purpose of our research is to show that all three of these distinctions—prescriptive/proscriptive, promotion/prevention, and behavioral activation/inhibition—are distinct and make independent contributions to concepts of interest to researchers studying morality.

2. Distinguishing motivational theories

The first task is to theoretically distinguish each of the theories from a larger, simplified approach/avoidance construct. Consistent with developments in motivation science (see [Scholer & Higgins, 2008](#)), we propose that each of the constructs under consideration in this

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 212 854 8464, +1 716 868 9830; fax: +1 212 854 3609.

E-mail addresses: jfc2134@columbia.edu (J.F.M. Cornwell), tory@psych.columbia.edu (E.T. Higgins).

manuscript occupies a distinct level of motivation. The “system” level of motivation refers to the tendency to approach desirable end-states and avoid undesirable end-states. The “strategic” level of motivation refers to the tendency to engage in this approach or avoidance in a strategic eager manner or a strategic vigilant manner based on how the goals are conceptualized (i.e., as either “ideals” or “oughts,” respectively). Finally, the “tactical” level of motivation refers to the particular motivational demands of the situation in which individuals find themselves, requiring either behavioral activation or inhibition. Fig. 1 illustrates how each level of motivation can be active when determining a course of action with respect to morality. According to this proposal, each of the distinct motives that we examine will be functionally independent of the others and make independent contributions to moral phenomena because each occupies a unique level motivationally.

Since the prescriptive and proscriptive systems are, in essence, a description of approach and avoidance orientations at the system level in morality (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009), below we will describe regulatory focus theory and control theory, their distinctions from this system level of approach/avoidance, and how each has been examined in the context of moral psychology. In the process, we hope to establish that examining only approach/avoidance at the system level does not provide a full account of moral motivation.

2.1. Regulatory focus theory

According to regulatory focus theory, there are two distinct strategic systems of goal pursuit. The *promotion* focus is associated with the pursuit of ideals and growth goals, concerned with the advancement from the status quo to a better state. The *prevention* focus is associated with the pursuit of oughts and security goals, concerned with the maintenance of the status quo against falling to a worse state (Higgins, 1997; 1998). Myriad lines of research have examined the importance of this distinction for both judgment and decision making (e.g., Scholer et al., 2010; Zou, Scholer, Higgins, 2014) and behavior (e.g., Förster, Higgins, & Idson, 1998; Freitas, Liberman, & Higgins, 2002).

As mentioned in this theory's earliest conceptualizations, it is important not to conflate promotion and prevention with, respectively, approach and avoidance at the system level. Theoretically speaking, both the promotion ideal and prevention ought systems are approach systems (Higgins, 1997; 1998; see Förster et al., 1998). Indeed, Förster et al. (1998) found a “goal looms larger” effect for both promotion and

prevention where participants became increasingly motivated as they approached the final desired end-state. Furthermore, discrepancies from both promotion ideals and prevention oughts produce negative affect, indicating that both are desired end-states to be approached (Higgins, 1987; Shah, 2003).

With respect to morality, some research shows similar effects of promotion and prevention and approach and avoidance. For example, both promotion and approach are more concerned about failures of omission, whereas both prevention and avoidance are more concerned about failures of commission (Camacho et al., 2003; Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009). And with respect to moral judgment, both the prevention system and proscriptive (avoidance) system of morality have been associated with binding moral foundations (Cornwell & Higgins, 2013; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013). However, rather than indicating that the constructs are the same, instead, we believe that this suggests that they have distinct reasons for this overlap—that each construct is accounting for different parts of the variance in moral judgment and value.

This position is supported by the ways in which approach/avoidance and promotion/prevention differ in the domain of morality. For example, if approach is concerned with bringing about positive end-states and avoidance is concerned with avoiding negative end-states, and promotion and prevention just represent instantiations of this fundamental principle in the area of morality, then promotion-focused individuals should be more approving of positive-valence responses to conflict and prevention-focused individuals should be more approving of negative-valence responses. Instead, research has shown that both promotion- and prevention-focused individuals approve of both positive and negative valence responses equally, only showing preferences for different kinds of strategic responses (*eager* responses for promotion; *vigilant* responses for prevention; see Camacho, Higgins, & Luger, 2003). Recently additional research (Wisneski, 2014) directly investigating the properties of the prescriptive/proscriptive distinction in light of regulatory focus theory found no link between experimental inductions of regulatory focus and the prescriptive/proscriptive “group” motives from Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Baldacci (2008), while at the same time it did provide further evidence for the importance of these latter motives for understanding differences in political ideology.

2.2. Control theory

The control theory of motivation is distinct from both system-level approach/avoidance and the strategic-level regulatory focus theory of motivation (see Scholer & Higgins, 2008). Rather than operating at the strategic level like regulatory focus, the control theory operates at the tactical behavioral level, relating to tendencies to *activate* behavior or *inhibit* behavior in response to circumstances (Carver & Scheier, 2001). These responses to the concrete situational characteristics eventually take on the form of motivational orientations, which correspond to the behavioral activation systems (BAS) and the behavioral inhibition system (BIS), respectively (Carver & White, 1994).

As with regulatory focus, these orientations are implicated in the approach of desired end-states and the avoidance of undesired end-states, but they are theoretically distinct from the orientations toward one or the other end-state (see Scholer & Higgins, 2008). Sometimes the achievement of a desired end-state involves the activation of behavior, but at other times (say, when external temptations would derail the achievement of a goal), the inhibition of behavior can be involved in the achievement of these desired end-states. Similarly, the avoidance of undesired end-states frequently requires the inhibition of behavior, but avoiding negative outcomes can also require the activation of behavior (e.g., running away from danger).

In terms of distinct associations of morality with BIS and BAS, research has shown that those with a stronger BAS compared to those with a stronger BIS are more likely to deem it ethical to kill one individual to save more in scenarios like the classic “trolley” dilemma (Van den Bos, Müller, & Damen, 2011). Research has also shown moral disgust to

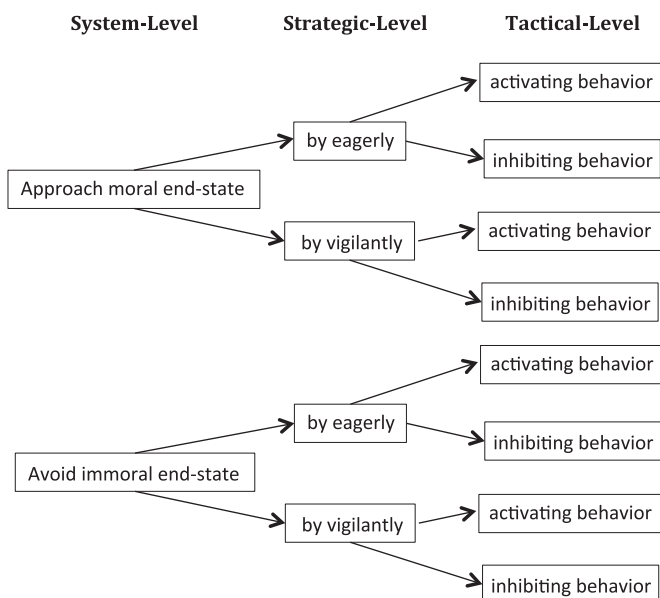


Fig. 1. An example of how all three motivational levels can be simultaneously active in taking moral action.

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