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Is Anything Sacred Anymore?

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"In imposing this requirement . . . the federal government is violating a First Amendment right that has stood for more than two centuries. And it is doing so in a manner that affects millions of Americans and harms some of our nation's most vital institutions."—Speaker of the House John Boehner, speaking in Congressional Session on February 8, 2012, about the Obama Administration's decision to require faith-based organizations to provide contraceptive services as part of employee health insurance plans. (Steinhauer, 2012)

As we sit down to write this commentary on Gray, Young, and Waytz's important and provocative target article, the controversy du jour dominating the cable news world is the Obama administration's sacrilegious attempt to usurp religious freedom in the United States—or the announcement of a simple employment regulation designed to ensure equal access to popular health services. Whether you see it as the former or latter, of course, depends on you whether you wear a red or blue uniform in the ongoing American cultural war.

When the Obama administration announced that church-affiliated organizations such as universities and hospitals would be required to provide employee insurance programs that include free access to preventive health services (including contraceptive services), many American conservatives exploded in moral outrage. Because the use of contraceptives is contrary to Catholic moral teaching, Republican politicians (like Congressman Boehner) and other right-wing pundits characterized the decision as a deeply offensive and unconstitutional attack by the federal government on a fundamental moral principle: the right to the free exercise of religion enshrined in our First Amendment. Conservative outrage was not assuaged by a concession offered a few weeks after the initial decision stating that all costs of contraceptive services would be borne by insurance companies rather than the faith-based organizations themselves.

Unsurprisingly, Democratic politicians and left-wing media voices advocated a quite different moral position. The liberal argument supporting the regulation centered on protecting women's rights, specifically the assertion that exempting faith-based organizations from including contraceptive services in their insurance programs unfairly denied their female employees equal access to these almost universally utilized and highly beneficial health services. Like their conservative counterparts then, liberals saw the morality of the contraception mandate as a matter of deep moral principle (fair treatment of a historically disadvantaged group) that seemed to involve no tangible costs to people of faith (no one would be forced in any way to use contraception) nor to faith-based organizations (the insurance companies would pick up the bill).

In the following pages, we return frequently to this and other real-world moral conflicts in our discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Gray et al.'s analysis. We believe these examples best capture the complexity and richness of in vivo moral judgments, and it is this complexity that any theory of moral judgment must account for if it aspires toward comprehensiveness. As we hope our opening example illustrates, the real moral judgments that impact our lives are thorny and multifaceted, as people wrestle to resolve contradictions between moral principles (both their own and those of others) and their consequences (both harmful and beneficial consequences that impact people, institutions, and ideas). The gist of our argument is that Gray et al.'s mind perception approach does not yet do full justice to this complexity, but that its focus on the archetypal moral dyad, and particularly the fascinating phenomena of dyadic completion, can contribute to a more complete and complex picture of moral judgment.

Agent Provocateur

The central thesis of Gray et al.'s article is both elegant in simplicity and rich in generativity. It is hard to dispute the fundamentally social nature of moral judgment—that the platonic ideal of immoral action is the image of one individual intentionally harming another. By linking this notion to the latest research on mind perception (e.g., Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007), Gray et al. are able to capture a good chunk of the mechanics of everyday moral judgment under a parsimonious conceptual umbrella and simultaneously generate novel predictions about some new and fascinating moral phenomena like dyadic completion and moral typecasting. There is little doubt that a great deal

of what Gray et al. argue, including the central role of mind perception in moral judgment, is absolutely right.

But the really great aspect of Gray et al.'s analysis is that its most interesting and controversial claims are almost assuredly wrong. We do not mean this harshly or facetiously. For an argument to be great, it is less important that it be correct than that it be provocative. Great ideas stimulate intellectual debate and motivate empirical testing and help the field as a whole iterate toward a more accurate understanding of a phenomenon. But it is hard to be both provocative and right. Complexity is the first casualty of provocation, and Gray et al.'s dyadic morality approach, particularly the virtually isomorphic relation it seems to posit between moral condemnation and interpersonal harm, will spur the field of moral psychology forward less because of the considerable amount their analysis gets right than because it provocatively but productively oversimplifies the complicated role of consequences in moral evaluation.

The Harm Hypothesis

Gray et al. are certainly not the first to note that moral responsibility requires an intentional agent (Aristotle, trans. 1998; Kant, 1795/1998; Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995). The more novel part of Gray et al.'s analysis flows from recognizing that the second aspect of mind perception, experience, is also crucial to moral judgment. According to Gray et al., moral evaluation requires not just an intentional moral agent but also a suffering moral patient, and moreover that this dyadic structure of agent and patient, intention and suffering is the very "essence" of morality.

Essence, of course, is a term with no specific psychological connotations about process or structure (even compared to other somewhat vague notions psychologists have relied on over the years such as prototype, exemplar, or schema). This is a key weakness of Gray et al.'s analysis that other commentators will almost certainly discuss in great detail. For our purposes, what is crucial about Gray et al.'s dyadic morality approach is that it seems to imply that interpersonal harm is causally embedded in the very meaning of morality, that no act can be morally offensive unless it is perceived to result in suffering. In the abstract of their article, for example, they assert that "all moral transgressions are fundamentally understood as agency plus experienced suffering—i.e., interpersonal harm – even ostensibly harmless acts such as purity violations" (p. 101). Later in the article they reinforce this point multiple times, stating, "On our account, perceived suffering is not a distinct moral domain, but a core feature of all immoral acts" (p. 107) and "A dyadic template suggests not only that perceived suffering is tied to immorality, but that all morality is understood through the lens of harm" (p. 108).

These are provocative statements to be sure, but what precisely do they mean, and are they right (i.e., supported by empirical evidence and/or consistent with prior conceptualizations of the moral domain)? As moral intuitionists, we interpret Gray et al. to mean that perceived harm and suffering are a part of, perhaps the very heart of, our gut moral reactions—that we experience actions as morally wrong precisely and directly because of the harm we sense in them. The fact that they explicitly reject an account based on "post hoc motivated reasoning" (p. 108) seems to confirm that Gray et al.'s position is not one in which perceived harm is associated with moral intuitions, or one particular variety of moral intuition, or even a way to justify moral intuitions, but rather that harm is inextricably linked to, even synonymous with, moral evaluation in a more fundamental, more implicit, more essentialistic way.

This bold assertion should, and we believe will, prove an effective stimulus for empirical research designed to assess its validity. This is the beauty of bold theorizing, and Gray et al. should be applauded for their intellectual temerity and the catalytic effect it will hopefully have on moral reasoning research. But chutzpah creates challenges as well, and Gray et al.'s challenge is how to square their admirably bold "harm hypothesis"[1] with a long history of philosophical thought and psychological research suggesting that, in fact, a key feature that distinguishes moral reasoning from reasoning more generally is its independence from, and most interestingly its frequent conflict with, considerations of harm and other consequences.

Morality Is Not Just About Harm

Philosophers have long debated the merits of consequentialist versus deontological moral ethics (Bentham, 1789/1961; Kant, 1785/1998, Singer, 1972; Smart & Williams, 1973), that is, whether the morality of actions should be judged solely by their consequences (i.e., ends justify means) or whether acts can be wrong in and of themselves (i.e., ends cannot justify some means). On a psychological level, a number of theorists have argued that the most distinctive characteristic of moral thinking, perhaps even its very essence, is this deontologically based notion of the "sacred," that moral systems assign certain acts and objects value that defies utilitarian considerations of costs and benefits (e.g., Atran, Axelrod, & Davis, 2007; Baron & Spranca, 1997; Bartels & Medin, 2007; Tetlock, 2003). One of the authors offers the personal example of having worn a gold necklace for 25 years that was given by the author's mother before she died.

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[1]For the remainder of this commentary we use the term "harm" as shorthand for lengthier, more cumbersome phrases like "interpersonal harm" or "harm and suffering."

On the open market that chain might be worth $200 at best, but the very thought of selling it for 10 or even 20 times that amount evokes moral revulsion (Tetlock, 2003). With a less sacred object capitalist sensibilities would be keener, but a cherished gift from one's late mother both defies and defiles fungibility. On a considerably broader scale, the seemingly interminable Israeli–Palestinian conflict is often cited as the iconic version of a sacred conflict in which possession of land both sides consider "holy" has taken on almost infinite value, such that no amount of money could convince either side to concede it and obtaining the land seems to be worth virtually any cost, including perpetuating a decades long conflict that continues to exact a huge toll in human suffering (Ginges, Atran, Medin, & Shikaki, 2007).

This notion that people have sacred or protected values presents two patterns of moral judgment that Gray et al.'s analysis will need to account for: (a) some actions are seen as morally wrong even when they are seen as causing little or no harm, and (b) consequently, people often judge acts that cause more harm as more morally acceptable than acts that cause less harm.

The phenomenon of harmless but immoral acts is nicely illustrated by Haidt's early research (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993) comparing moral judgments of American college students (a quintessentially WEIRD population; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) with those of a Brazilian working class sample. Although Americans struggled to understand harmless but offensive acts like masturbating with a chicken carcass or cleaning your toilet with your country's flag, similar acts posed little problem for Brazilian participants. But contemporary American politics is nothing if not weird, and examples of harmless immorality are easy to find there as well. For example, in the political dispute that opened this commentary, conservative moral outrage flows from what seems to be a completely symbolic sacrilege with no harmful behavioral or economic consequences. It is widely acknowledged by all parties that the Obama administration's proposed regulation would be materially harmless; it requires no person of faith to use contraception, and the revised version requires no religiously affiliated organization to cover any costs for employees who desire these services. The intense moral umbrage toward the regulation expressed by many Catholics and political conservatives is driven instead by their commitment to the sacred principle of religious freedom, and the perceived defilement of that principle by a purely symbolic association between the institutional embodiment of the principle (religiously affiliated organizations) and the morally prohibited act of contraception (think contamination or contagion a la Rozin, Millman, & Nemeroff, 1986).

A similar example from the other side of the political aisle is the outrage frequently expressed by same-sex marriage proponents regarding the issue of "domestic partnerships." For many political liberals, the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals are a deep moral conviction, and most place overwhelming importance on the term "marriage" over and above access to the very rights they wish these individuals to possess. In California, for example, the legal dispute over the constitutionality of an anti-same-sex marriage initiative has been raging for years and may now be headed for the U.S. Supreme Court. This is despite the fact that under California law individuals in recognized domestic partnerships have for years had precisely the same rights as married individuals. As with the religious freedom kerfuffle then, one could again argue that in this particular example the core moral complaint of the aggrieved party is purely symbolic, having more to do with semantics than hedonics. But the moral passions inflamed are intense nevertheless, and Gray et al.'s harm hypothesis seems underequipped to account for this kind of moral complexity.

A related complexity of moral judgment is that, because relatively harmless acts often evoke strong moral feelings, people frequently find themselves in situations where an act that leads to more objective harm is judged as more moral than an objectively less harmful alternative. This odd conflict lies at the heart of psychology's thriving cottage industry in "trolleyology" (e.g., Cushman & Young, 2009; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001) and is the driving force behind philosophers' and psychologists' long-term love affair with moral dilemmas. Gray et al. made little mention of moral dilemma research in their discussion of integrating different levels of moral psychology (pp. 101–124), but it presents another interesting challenge for their harm-centric analysis. Taking as our example the classic footbridge dilemma (whether to push one large man off a bridge to stop an oncoming train that will otherwise kill five workmen), the crucial issue for the harm hypothesis is why so many people have the overwhelming sense that the most moral choice in this situation is the one that results in the higher body count.

Leaving the fanciful world of runaway trolleys to return to the farcical world of American politics, the same tendency to forgo advantageous trade-offs because of a reluctance to engage in morally offensive acts can be seen in a host of real-world dilemmas. Liberals reject the morality of so-called enhanced interrogation despite its potential to thwart future catastrophic terrorist attacks, and conservatives abhor embryonic stem cell research despite its potential to produce future cures for many life-threatening diseases. But our favorite recent example of this tendency was seen in one of the early debates between the Republican hopefuls in the 2012 presidential primary when each was asked whether he or she would accept an economic deal with Democrats that included $10 in spending cuts for every $1 in increased taxes (Benen, 2011). All eight of

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the candidates onstage that night happily declined that highly advantageous deal, suggesting that in current Republican politics, compromising with Democrats on tax policy has taken the form of a taboo trade-off (Tetlock, 2003).

Perceiving Versus Constructing Harm

Our argument so far is that the concept of the sacred, and both empirical and anecdotal examples of situations where perceptions of harm are either unrelated to or in direct conflict with intuitive moral evaluations, are complications that Gray et al.'s analysis cannot currently accommodate. They will no doubt dispute this assertion, likely claiming a broad definition of harm and suffering (including "bodily injury, emotional damage, or even spiritual destruction," p. 107) that is the ultimate source of our deontological intuitions. They might also cite empirical evidence for the primacy of harm based on the asymmetric potentiation of harm-related versus other morally related concepts (Gray & Ward, as cited in Gray et al., this issue). But framing harm and suffering so broadly presents substantial problems of conceptual coherence (if disgust is a heuristic for potential suffering [p. 110], isn't the same true of hunger and thirst?) and evaluating specific empirical findings must wait until detailed reports are in the published record.

We suggest, however, that considerable theoretical integration can be accomplished by simply softening Gray et al.'s strict (albeit provocative) equating of perceived harm with perceived immorality. As we hoped to illustrate in the preceding sections, there are many instances when judgments of immorality do not closely track assessments of harm and suffering. Moreover, there seems to be substantial evidence for moral intuitions that are not easily construed as deriving from harm (we are thinking here of both moral foundations theory and relationship regulation theory; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Rai & Fiske, 2011) and little theoretical traction to be gained by broadening the definition of harm to encompass damage to spirits, institutions, traditions, and the like.

If we are to loosen the theoretical connection between harm and morality, however, we are left to explain why, empirically, harm and morality judgments are so frequently intertwined. To do this, we suggest the concept of moral coherence processes (Liu & Ditto, 2012) and identify Gray et al.'s phenomenon of dyadic completion as one elegant example.

Models of explanatory coherence (Read, Vanman, & Miller, 1997; Thagard, 2004) posit that individuals construct beliefs and preferences through a process of parallel constraint satisfaction (e.g., Simon, Krawezyk, & Holyoak, 2004). Coherence-based models subsume classic cognitive consistency theories but reject simplifying assumptions about linear causal flow in favor

of a more dynamic view of mental processes in which beliefs, feelings, goals, and actions are mutually influential and are adjusted iteratively toward a point of maximal internal consistency or "coherence."

It is reasonable to assume that coherence pressures apply to moral as well as nonmoral judgments and that they are guided in the moral domain by Gray et al.'s intentional agent–suffering patient template. That is, the key insight of Gray et al.'s mind perception view is that the archetype of immoral action is one individual intentionally inflicting harm on another; the more intentional the act and the greater the inflicted suffering, the more immoral the act is perceived to be. Consistent with this idea, there is overwhelming evidence that actions associated with both greater attributions of intentionality (e.g., Cushman, 2008; Malle, 2006; Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995) and greater perceptions of resultant harm (e.g., Gino, Shu, & Bazerman, 2010; Walster, 1966) lead to stronger moral condemnation. But a coherence perspective suggests that the causal flow should operate in the other direction as well. Feelings of moral condemnation should lead individuals to construct a coherent moral narrative along the agent–patient plot line so beautifully articulated in Gray et al.'s article. Acts that feel intuitively immoral should lead to a search for a culprit and a victim, and the more an action feels immoral, the more intention we should ascribe to the culprit and the more harm and suffering we should ascribe to the victim. Intention and harm judgments would be expected to have a similar coherent relation; more intentional agents should lead to more suffering patients and vice versa.

A moral coherence view differs from Gray et al.'s account by (a) assuming that moral evaluations can arise intuitively and independently from the perception of harm, and (b) consequently, in many situations harm and suffering are better conceived of as constructed post hoc (to complete a coherent moral narrative) than being an essential part of the moral intuition itself. This is not to say that harm is not a crucial intuitive trigger of moral outrage. In fact, consistent with the thrust of Gray et al.'s analysis, interpersonal harm is almost certainly dominant among all moral considerations (an assertion that we suspect proponents of both moral foundations theory and relationship regulation theory would find agreeable). But it seems to be a fundamental characteristic of human psychology for people to invest many types of acts and objects with sacred significance, and it makes little conceptual sense to subsume our gut moral reactions to every sacred transgression under the label of harm. Instead, we believe a moral coherence view—that sees both intention and harm as often "constructed" rather than "perceived"—provides a compelling integration of a large body of existing research in moral psychology.

First, Gray et al.'s dyadic completion studies reveal the mutually coherent relations between

intention and harm. Electronic shock inflicted intentionally rather than accidentally is perceived as causing greater suffering (i.e., physical pain; Gray & Wegner, 2008) and, conversely, greater perceptions of suffering lead to stronger attributions of moral agency (Gray & Wegner, 2010; Morewedge, 2009).

Second, an extensive body of research conducted by Knobe (2010; Pettit & Knobe, 2009) and a host of others (e.g., Alicke, 2000; Cushman, Knobe, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008; Young & Phillips, 2011) has shown that moral evaluations produce coherent assessments of intention, causality, and control. In short, the more an act offends our moral sensibilities, the more motivated we are to construct an agentic perpetrator who can be held responsible for the offense.

Finally, there is also good reason to believe that moral evaluations shape beliefs about costs and benefits. We agree with Gray et al.'s characterization of Haidt's (2001) famous moral dumbfounding phenomenon (p. 110) as producing a somewhat disorienting clash of perceptions. Acts that feel immoral in the absence of obvious harmful consequences should produce something akin to cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and motivate attempts to restore a sense of coherence. In his dumbfounding studies, Haidt cleverly blocks the most obvious paths of dissonance reduction by constructing his examples in ways that no harm or suffering can be easily identified. This leaves participants struggling to make sense of their insistent intuition that there just has to be something bad about having sex with your sibling (not to mention tomorrow night's dinner).

In most real-world situations, however, individuals have considerable latitude to shape consequentialist beliefs to be consistent with moral intuitions. While reading our political anecdotes, many readers were likely struck with the feeling that the actors involved did not really perceive the various moral offenses described as without harmful consequences. This is most obvious in our opening quote, in which Speaker of the House Boehner asserts explicitly that the Obama administration's contraception mandate "affects millions of Americans and harms some of our nation's most vital institutions." Similarly, we suspect that supporters of same-sex "marriage" believe that title is extremely consequential, and without it gay and lesbian relationships would likely follow the path of "separate but equal," a formulation that was judged to be harmful and discriminatory in the case of racial civil rights.

We agree with these characterizations, but rather than interpreting them as evidence that the perception of harm is the cause of the various actors' moral reactions, we believe that it nicely illustrates how coherence processes operate to reinforce sacred values with a favorable cost–benefit profile.

In their influential analysis of the concept of protected values, Baron and Spranca (1997) posited that people tend to deny the consequentialist trade-offs inherent to sacredness. True moral stands—acknowledging the effectiveness of enhanced interrogation while refusing on moral grounds to endorse it—are psychologically challenging in much the same way as our examples of moral dumbfounding. In a morally coherent world, acts that feel immoral have costs and acts that feel moral have benefits. Baron and Spranca suggested that people cope with this conflict by trying to "have their non-utilitarian cake and eat it too" (p. 13), or as Ditto and Liu (2011) characterized it, people should align their descriptive beliefs about acts' potential consequences to their prescriptive intuitions about the acts' morality. To examine this hypothesis, Liu and Ditto (2012) conducted a survey of more than 1,500 individuals on the website your-morals.org and found a strong and consistent pattern across four different real-world moral dilemmas such that the more an individual conceived of an act (e.g., enhanced interrogation or embryonic stem cell research) as a protected value (i.e., believed it was morally wrong even if produced valid intelligence or future medical breakthroughs), the less they believed it would actually bring about those beneficial consequences and the more they believed it had harmful costs (e.g., resulted in permanent physical damage to suspects or encouraged pregnancy for profit). Most crucially in the present context, Liu and Ditto also reported an experiment in which they manipulated the "deontological morality" of the death penalty by having participants read essays arguing that it was either inherently immoral (e.g., it is simply wrong to ever intentionally take another human life) or inherently moral (e.g., the death penalty is the only just response when someone takes another person's life). Compared to participants exposed to the pro-death penalty essay, participants reading the anti-death penalty essay came to believe less strongly in the deterrent efficacy of capital punishment and gave higher estimates of its likelihood of resulting in wrongful executions. This occurred despite the fact that these consequences were never once mentioned or even alluded to in the essays.

The results of the Liu and Ditto (2012) studies are important in the current context for two reasons. First, they provide experimental evidence consistent with a moral coherence view by demonstrating a causal relation from moral evaluations to beliefs about beneficial and harmful consequences. Although these finding do not directly address the strong version of Gray et al.'s harm hypothesis, they do suggest that the oft-observed relation between harm and immorality may sometimes result because perceived harm leads to moral condemnation, but other times may result because moral condemnation leads to the construction of harm.

Second, our tendency to support our sacred values with a "consequentialist crutch" (Ditto & Liu, 2011) helps explain the complicated, multifaceted moral

explanations that seem to characterize real world moral conflict. As illustrated in our opening example (the case of the Pill v. Religious Freedom), moral justifications often involve an amalgam of principled stands and arguments about practical costs and benefits. This invariably involves psychological conflict, as we sometimes feel the pull of the sacred telling us that the moral path does not always lead to the most beneficial ends, but this conflict seems most often to evolve toward a coherent moral narrative in which principles and practicality go together in the end. A comprehensive theory of moral judgment must remember to cast the sacred as a featured character in the complex and dynamic story of human moral psychology.

Conclusion

We applaud Gray et al.'s article as an extremely productive contribution to the burgeoning literature on moral cognition. We look forward to future empirical work addressing the explanatory power of their harm hypothesis relative to alternative views; important research that will no doubt be accelerated by the compelling argument assembled in this target article.

Quite independently, the phenomena of dyadic completion adds to a growing body of theory and research suggesting that our moral evaluations play an important role in organizing the kinds of "nonmoral" beliefs (about intention, harm, etc.) and judgment processes (attributions of causality, control, etc.) that have pre-occupied social psychologists for years (see Knobe, 2010). At the broadest level, this can be seen as another example of people's long noted tendency to blur the distinction between what is and what ought to be (Davis, 1978; Hume, 1740/1985); and we believe that Gray et al.'s mind perception framework, informed by the growing literature on coherence processes, will be extremely helpful as our field attempts to understand the fascinating and complicated interplay between prescriptive and descriptive thinking.

In sum, then, it seems clear that for the field of moral psychology Gray et al.'s article is likely to have many important benefits and few harmful costs. And it is likely to cause suffering only for those who cannot take a little good-natured provocation in the name of scientific progress.

Note

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