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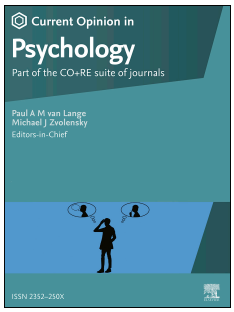

Moral currencies: explaining corrupt collaboration

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Moral currencies: explaining corrupt collaboration

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Abstract

Overall, people want to behave ethically. In some cases temptation steers them away from ethical behavior. In other cases purely ethical behavior is not possible, because the same behavior entails both ethical and unethical consequences. For example, collaboration with others may require people to be dishonest. We suggest that to justify their choices in such cases, people engage in a moral calculus in which they consider ethical values and behaviors as moral currencies which can be traded for each other. This view is consistent with previous accounts that highlight the licensing effect that ethical actions can have on subsequent unethical actions when ethical and unethical actions are temporally distant and independent from each other, and also with cases where the same action has both positive and negative ethical value. We highlight the case of corrupt collaboration, where people often forgo honesty in favor of self- and group-serving collaboration, as one where moral currencies provide a useful framework for analysis and generation of research questions.

Moral currencies and corrupt collaboration

Humans are an 'ultrasocial' species, unique among mammals in our inclination to cooperate by making choices that help others at a personal cost [1]. We are also remarkably honest, even when dishonesty is personally profitable [2–4]. These preferences for cooperation and honesty, even when both behaviors entail objective costs to the decision making individuals, may be manifestations of a general preference for ethical behavior, which had an adaptive role in the evolution of the human species [5]. Our interest in the current paper lies in situations in which ethical values are at odds with one another. What happens, for example, when honesty and cooperation clash, such that to achieve one it is necessary to forfeit the other? We propose that in such situations ethical behavior constitutes a moral currency which can be used to justify unethical behavior. Considering morality in terms of exchangeable currencies may help to understand human choice when confronted with alternatives that promote one value at the cost of another.

Moral currencies: Trading one norm with another

Rather than prescribing ethical guidelines that aim to define how people should behave, the field of behavioral ethics is concerned with describing how people actually behave when facing tempting situations, where personal profit comes at the expense of adhering to ethical principles [6]. A central observation is that dishonesty comes at an internal cost; it increases tension and harms people's moral self-image [2,7,8]. Following this observation, special attention is being devoted to the study of tension-reducing mechanisms, or justifications, which enable people to engage in dishonest

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behavior while maintaining a reasonable positive moral self-image [9,10]. Some examples of such self-serving justifications include ambiguity (when it is not clear which moral norm applies), confessing (admitting past wrongdoing), and distancing (pointing to others' moral transgressions and judging them harshly) [11].

Some types of justifications pit the unethical behavior in question against another behavior which has moral value. A prominent class of such justifications for unethical behavior revolves around the concept of *moral licensing*. According to moral licensing theory "people who initially behave in a moral way can later display behaviors that are immoral, unethical, or otherwise problematic" [12,13]. A more general concept is *moral balancing*, whereby behaving morally or immorally decreases the likelihood of engaging in the same behavior later [14]. The difference between moral licensing and moral balancing is that the former refers to cases where ethical behavior paves the way to unethical behavior, i.e., the ethical behavior is the antecedent and the unethical behavior is the consequence, whereas the later also includes the opposite pattern, whereby unethical behavior leads to ethical behavior. Both concepts imply that people engage in a moral calculus, attempting to strike a balance between their self-interest and their moral self-image. In this view, ethical values such as honesty, generosity, or integrity can be seen as *moral currencies* which can be traded for one another. Behaving according to an ethical principle (e.g., being generous) adds credit to one's moral account, and violating a principle (e.g., lying) subtracts credit from the account.

Independent versus dependent actions

The choices studied in the moral licensing literature are typically distinct and independent from one another, with the ethical licensing behavior taking place before the unethical licensed behavior. For example, a person who just spent a day volunteering to clean a public park, may find it more acceptable to misreport her income later. The two actions—volunteering to clean the park and misreporting the income—are linked only by the chance occurrence that they are temporally adjacent. If the perpetrator did not happen to fill her tax reports on the same day she volunteered in the park, volunteering would not have a licensing effect. Another example from the literature is that after purchasing eco-friendly products, participants in an experiment stole more money than participants who bought regular products [15]. In both of these examples the licensed behavior takes place in a distinct domain from the initial ethical (licensing) behavior (volunteering vs. tax reports in the first example; consumer choices vs. stealing in the second). Because the two actions take place in distinct domains it is possible, in principle, to make ethical choices in both. Even though moral licensing theory suggests that the ethical action makes a subsequent unethical action more likely, this is not a logical necessity: it is still possible to avoid the temptation and make two

ethical choices. For example, it is possible to purchase eco-friendly products and avoid stealing. Similarly, a recent paper shows that endorsing a female candidate did not lead to an increased tendency to favor men in another context [16]. Obviously, it is also possible to make two unethical choices when actions are independent from one another.

The licensing behavior need not always precede the unethical behavior. Moral licensing can be prospective; people who anticipate engaging in moral behavior in the future have been shown to behave more immorally in the present [17]. The story of Robin Hood nicely demonstrates that moral behavior can have a licensing effect even when it occurs after the unethical behavior. According to legend, Robin Hood and his band of "merry men" stole from the rich in order to give to the poor. While stealing is obviously an unethical deed, giving to the poor is ethical and praise worthy. Although the ethical action (giving) occurs after the unethical action (stealing) it serves as a justification for it, especially since the stealing is committed with the pre-established intention to follow it with the ethical action of giving to the poor. Furthermore, in Robin Hood's case, the unethical behavior is not only carried out with the intention to follow it with an ethical action; it is also a necessary condition for the subsequent ethical action (without stealing, there would be nothing to give). As a result, both actions may be reasonably considered as a single unit of moral evaluation, such that Robin Hood's moral self-image, when contemplating whether to steal or not, depends on a combination of the negative effect of stealing now and the positive effect of giving in the future. Note that these differences from the usual moral licensing scenarios do not affect the general observation that values such as honesty and generosity can be thought of as moral currencies that can be traded for one another; whether actions are independent or not, if you have enough of one value, you do not need as much of the other to maintain a positive moral self-view. In moral currency terms, Hood pays for stealing by giving, and this moral calculus is the basis for the character's virtuous image in popular culture (indeed, his statue stands proudly near Nottingham Castle). In a similar vein, recent research on prosocial lies shows that deception may be perceived as ethical when it is benevolent or prevents harm [18,19].

Corrupt collaboration

The Robin Hood example demonstrates that the licensing behavior can occur after the unethical behavior, and that the two behaviors can be inherently linked. Some experiments examined "altruistic dishonesty", similar in essence to the case of Robin Hood, by allowing participants to cheat (typically by misreporting the true value of private information), with the benefits from cheating benefiting a prosocial cause (either other people or charities). Choices in such experiments present a particular challenge to individuals who aspire to make ethical choices. Since helping

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others is entangled with cheating, it is not possible to be perfectly ethical; the decision maker cannot, by definition, be both honest and pro-social, but must choose one of these values at the expense of the other (Robin Hood can steal and give, or not steal and not give, but it is not possible for him to give without stealing). When dishonesty is not only altruistic, but also self-serving, the temptation to cheat is particularly strong; when people must sacrifice one ethical value to be true to another [20], they may conclude that they might as well make a profit. Indeed, experiments that examine altruistic dishonesty, either self-serving or not, find that people cheat more when the profits from cheating benefit others in addition to themselves [9,21–27].

Whereas cooperation is usually defined as a willingness to pay a personal cost in order to help others towards their individual goals [1,28], we refer to collaboration as a situation in which two or more agents work together towards a single shared goal. Collaborative settings appear to be particularly challenging for ethical behavior. When dyad members can increase their joint and personal profits by tacitly coordinating their lying, dishonesty rates seem to skyrocket. As an illustration, a recent meta-analysis on dishonesty reports that individuals working alone rarely fully exploit the situation to their advantage, obtaining, on average, only about 25% of the payoff they could obtain if they were maximally dishonest [2]. In contrast, dyad members working in collaboration have been shown to obtain more than 70% of the maximum payoff [29]. Collaboration, it seems, is a particularly valuable moral currency. Even otherwise honest people refrain from terminating profitable collaborative relationships with dishonest partners [30].

The extent to which collaboration serves as a moral currency which can be traded for honesty depends on the particular setting. A recent meta-analysis on corrupt collaboration shows that cheating is more prevalent when it has no negative consequences to third parties and when groups consist of more males and younger individuals, and that when partners interact repeatedly, participants lie more when their partners lie as well [31]. Cheating is more prevalent when partners perceive each other as similar [32], when interests are aligned [33], when cheating occurs in a simultaneous (leaderless), rather than sequential, setting [34], or when cheating is relatively normative [35,36]. Interestingly, it is plausible that the effects of perceived similarity and aligned interests are due to an increase in the positive value of collaboration, while the effect of cheating being normative is due to a decrease in the negative value of cheating.

Open questions

A number of intriguing aspects of trading various moral currencies, for example, honesty for collaboration, remain unexplored. First, an unanswered question relates to the role that culture plays in shaping the way people trade moral currencies with each other. Given that levels of honesty and

cooperation are heterogeneous across cultures [37,38], it is unclear whether and how the internal trading value of a certain norm, e.g., honesty, is affected by the local culture and society on the one hand, and by individual dispositions on the other [39–41]. Second, and relatedly, whereas cooperation is common [42], it is often parochial; recent work demonstrates that people are more inclined to help in-group members than out-group members [43–47]. Plausibly, people trade moral currencies differently (i.e., use different exchange rates) when ethical or unethical actions benefit in-group or out-group members [48]. Helping an out-group member, or establishing a collaborative relationship with an out-group member, may not be worth as much, in terms of moral currencies, as doing so with in-group members. Recent evidence is mixed, however, with some researchers finding that dyads cheat less when decisions are made with out-group members, and others finding no difference [49,50]. Third and finally, the moral currency logic suggests that preferences about moral values may be transitive [51]. The idea is that if a certain person prefers collaboration over truth-telling and truth-telling over equality, this individual will also prefer collaboration over equality. It is unclear, however, whether a moral currency calculus is transitive in this sense. Alternatively, people may consider ethical values in small sets and use different 'exchange rates' when trading value X with Y and Y with Z. Such behavior may occur, for example, when certain values are considered a taboo only in certain contexts [52], or due to cognitive limitations that selectively hamper decision-makers' ability to evaluate the consequences of their actions [53].

Conclusion

Ethical values are often traded as if they constitute moral currencies. To maintain a positive self-image, people trade doing wrong with doing good. Understanding how various values are traded when pitted against other values allows to map the value that norms, such as honesty and cooperation, carry. Doing so is especially interesting since it is unclear whether people's internal moral currencies system uses a fixed exchange rate transcending across situations and towards various groups, or alternatively a more flexible exchange rate that allows people to justify their moral trade as it best fits their interests.

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Honesty as a moral currency

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Contribution:

1. Ori Weisel Conceptualization; Writing - Original Draft; Writing - Review & Editing
2. Shaul Shalvi Conceptualization; Writing - Original Draft; Writing - Review & Editing

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