

When virtue leads to villainy: advances in research on moral self-licensing

Daniel A Effron¹ and Paul Conway^{2,3}

Acting virtuously can subsequently free people to act less-than-virtuously. We review recent insights into this *moral self-licensing effect*: first, it is reliable, though modestly sized, and occurs in both real-world and laboratory contexts; second, planning to do good, reflecting on foregone bad deeds, or observing ingroup members' good deeds is sufficient to license less virtuous behavior; third, when people need a license, they can create one by strategically acting or planning to act more virtuously, exaggerating the sinfulness of foregone bad deeds, or reinterpreting past behavior as moral credentials; and fourth, moral self-licensing effects seem most likely to occur when people interpret their virtuous behavior as demonstrating their lack of immorality but not signaling that morality is a core part of their self-concept.

Addresses

¹ London Business School, United Kingdom

² University of Cologne, Germany

Corresponding author: Effron, Daniel A (deffron@london.edu)

³ Paul Conway will begin a position at Florida State University in fall 2015.

Current Opinion in Psychology 2015, 6:32–35

This review comes from a themed issue on **Morality and ethics**

Edited by **Francesca Gino** and **Shaul Shalvi**

For a complete overview see the [Issue](#) and the [Editorial](#)

Available online 21st March 2015

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.03.017>

2352-250X/© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Though it borders on tautology to say that the world would be better if everyone acted more virtuously, fifteen years of research reveal that acting virtuously can ironically *reduce* future virtuous action. When people can point to actions or thoughts that attest to their good character, they often act like they have a license to stray from the straight and narrow path by helping less [1], cheating more [2], or enacting more prejudiced-seeming behavior [3]. The present article reviews new insights into this *moral self-licensing effect* since the publication of review articles five years ago [4,5]. These insights concern reliability and generalizability, sources of moral license, strategies for creating a moral license, and key moderators.

Defining moral self-licensing

Moral self-licensing occurs when evidence of a person's virtue frees him or her to act less-than-virtuously [4]. For example, an opportunity to choose environmentally friendly products increased subsequent dishonesty [2], agreeing to provide help reduced people's charity donations [6], and endorsing a Black politician (Barack Obama) increased people's willingness to favor Whites over Blacks [7]. Apparently, the chance to establish 'moral credentials' [3] reduced people's inhibition against behavior that could cast doubt on their morality.⁴ Although the desire to appear moral to others could contribute to moral self-licensing, studies suggest that this effect can also be driven by the motivation to appear moral to oneself [3,5,10].

The term *moral self-licensing* has three core components. First, feeling *licensed* entails perceiving that you 'are permitted to take an action or express a thought without fear of discrediting [yourself]' [5]. Second, *moral* refers broadly to domains associated with virtue, which present conflicts between how people 'want' to act versus how they 'should' act — domains such as honesty, prejudice, environmentalism, and self-control [11–13]. Thus, a *moral* license frees people to act less-than-virtuously specifically by providing evidence of their virtue. Not all licensing effects are moral licensing effects [5]. For example, membership in certain groups can entitle a person to express certain opinions without necessarily providing evidence of her virtue [14,15]. Third, a *self*-licensing effect occurs when people themselves feel free to act; excusing another person's transgression may involve moral licensing, but not moral *self*-licensing [8,16].

Reliability and generalizability

Moral self-licensing appears to be a reliable, if modestly sized, effect: across published and unpublished studies, the average effect size was $d = .31$ [17•]. Evidence of moral self-licensing comes primarily from laboratory studies (e.g., [18–24]), but recent field studies suggest generalizability to real-world contexts. For example, participants in one study reported events at random intervals during their daily lives; people who performed

⁴ Two complementary mechanisms could explain moral self-licensing [4,5,8,9]: good deeds may grant *moral credits* that can be 'exchanged' for the right to commit even blatantly bad deeds, or good deeds may establish *moral credentials* which make ambiguous behavior seem less problematic. Distinguishing between mechanisms is beyond this article's scope.

good deeds early in a day typically performed fewer good deeds and more bad deeds later that day [25^{••}]. Other researchers found that an intervention that reduced water usage among homeowners ironically increased electricity usage, suggesting that feeling virtuous about conserving water may have licensed homeowners to conserve less electricity [26]. Licensing may also occur at the organizational level [27]: an archival study of 49 *Fortune*-500 companies found that corporate social responsibility efforts predicted subsequent corporate social irresponsibility [28[•]]. Although moral self-licensing has been documented across multiple contexts, the effect size varies substantially across studies [17^{••}], and not all paradigms seem reliable [29], which may reflect undiscovered moderators and underpowered studies (Blanken and colleagues suggest 165 participants per cell to achieve 80% power; [17^{••}]). To summarize, moral self-licensing appears generally reliable and has been documented outside of the lab, but more research is needed to understand when it is most reliable and to what contexts it generalizes best.

Sources of moral license besides good deeds

Whereas early research focused on prior good deeds as a source of moral license, recent research reveals three additional sources [10]. First, people may act licensed after reflecting on *counterfactual transgressions* — bad things they could have done, but did not do. In one study, White participants given an opportunity to forego blatantly racist behavior, compared to those with no such opportunity, subsequently expressed less racially sensitive views [30]. In another study, dieters who reflected on unhealthy choices they previously avoided, compared to those who reflected on a control topic, subsequently made and followed more ‘sinful’ dieting plans [31[•]]. Second, people may act licensed when they can reflect on *prefactual virtues* — good deeds that they plan to perform [32–34]. For example, undergraduates were more likely to express overtly prejudiced views after pledging to donate blood later [35[•]]. Third, people may derive a license from *vicarious virtues* — good deeds performed by ingroup members. For example, non-prejudiced behavior by one group member can make other, highly identified group members more comfortable expressing racially suspect views [36]. Together, these findings illustrate that people have substantial flexibility in licensing themselves without performing good deeds; it is sufficient merely to reflect on foregone bad deeds, to anticipate performing good deeds, or to recall good deeds by group members.

Creating moral credentials

Most moral self-licensing research manipulates whether people have an opportunity to establish evidence of their virtue. However, people need not passively wait for such an opportunity — they actively create ‘moral credentials’ when needed [10]. People crave these credentials when they anticipate acting less-than-virtuously, when their

moral character has been questioned, or in other situations where their moral standing is uncertain. One strategy for creating credentials is to enact — or merely plan to enact — credentialing behaviors. For example, White participants evaluated a Black job candidate more favorably when they were made to worry that their future behavior could seem prejudiced ([37], see also [38]), and dieters planned to make healthier choices later when facing an opportunity to indulge in the present [39].

As another strategy for creating credentials, people will exaggerate the sinfulness of behaviors that they declined to perform — that is, they will invent counterfactual transgressions. For example, tempting dieters with an indulgent dessert led them to exaggerate the unhealthiness of snacks that they had previously declined to eat [31[•]]. Apparently, they tried to license indulgence by exaggerating the ‘sinfulness’ of the foods not eaten. Similarly, the motivation to establish non-racist credentials led White participants to overestimate how many opportunities to make prejudiced judgments they had previously had (and passed up). Thus, they exaggerated the racism of the road not taken [30].

People can also create moral credentials by reinterpreting their past behavior. Performing a minor good deed — for example, giving a quarter to a homeless person — may not seem like substantial evidence of virtue at the time, but it can take on exaggerated moral significance in retrospect when people need evidence of their morality. For example, facing the prospect of receiving negative feedback on a morality test led participants to estimate that their decision to raise 50¢ for charity would be regarded as better evidence of their morality by an observer [40^{••}]. Only people who were motivated to protect a virtuous self-image showed this effect, suggesting that this motivation was what led them to make a mountain of morality from a molehill of virtue. To summarize, when people need evidence of their virtue, they can enact or plan to enact virtuous behavior, invent counterfactual transgressions, or reinterpret past behavior as moral credentials.

Moral self-licensing versus moral self-consistency

Sometimes, acting virtuously can increase, rather than decrease, subsequent virtuous behavior — inducing self-consistency rather than self-licensing. Research suggests that moral self-licensing (versus self-consistency) is most likely to occur when people focus concretely on their virtuous behavior and its consequences (versus abstractly on its implications for their moral values and identity [41,42^{••},43]), when the virtuous behavior is framed as evidence of progress toward a moral goal (versus a signal of commitment to that goal) [32,44[•]], when the virtuous behavior is costless (versus costly) [45[•]], or when people have depleted (versus ample) cognitive resources [46[•]]. We posit that these moderators all affect the extent to

which virtuous behavior increases the self-importance of moral identity [47,48]. When a person interprets her behavior as a signal that virtue figures prominently in her self-concept, then she is likely to act more virtuously in the future [49–52]. Virtuous behavior sends such a signal when it is costly or effortful to perform, when people have ample cognitive resources to think abstractly about values and identity, and when people reflect on their commitments to moral goals. By contrast, we propose, moral self-licensing may occur when behavior does not greatly increase how much people value a virtuous identity, but merely allows them to rule out a discrediting identity, such as racist, glutton, or egoist.⁵ For example, Monin and Miller [3] found that rejecting blatantly misogynistic statements licensed men to make more gender-biased hiring decisions. Rejecting the statements may have signaled to the men that they were not raving sexists, rather than convincing them that they deeply valued gender equality — apparently enough for a license, but insufficient to obligate consistency. In short, demonstrating that you are not a sinner may provide a license to sin, whereas convincing yourself that you value saintliness may prevent you from sinning.

Summary and conclusion

Moral self-licensing is a reliable if modestly sized effect that occurs in both the laboratory and the real world. People are more willing to act less-than-virtuously when they can point to evidence of their virtue: good deeds or plans, foregone bad deeds (i.e., counterfactual transgressions), or even good deeds performed by ingroup members. When people require evidence of their virtue, they may create it by acting or planning to act more virtuously, inventing counterfactual transgressions, or reinterpreting past behavior as moral credentials. Finally, moral self-licensing may be most likely to occur when people construe evidence of virtue as proof that they are not immoral, rather than proof that they value morality. We call on researchers to conduct high-powered studies to refine understanding of key moderators of moral self-licensing, to unpack the underlying mechanisms, and to develop interventions to prevent it — so that virtuous behavior can more readily make the world a better place rather than license people to sin.

References and recommended reading

Papers of particular interest, published since 2013, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- of outstanding interest

1. Jordan J, Mullen E, Murnighan JK: **Striving for the moral self: the effects of recalling past moral actions on future moral behavior.** *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2011, **37**:701-713.

⁵ Measurement-of-mediation studies suggest a role for moral identity in self-licensing, but they do not distinguish between the feeling of having ruled out an immoral identity versus having committed to a moral one [6,36,42**].

2. Mazar N, Zhong C-B: **Do green products make us better people?** *Psychol Sci* 2010, **21**:494-498.
 3. Monin B, Miller DT: **Moral credentials and the expression of prejudice.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2001, **81**:33-43.
 4. Merritt AC, Effron DA, Monin B: **Moral self-licensing: when being good frees us to be bad.** *Soc Pers Psychol Compass* 2010, **4**:344-357.
 5. Miller DT, Effron DA: **Psychological license: when it is needed and how it functions.** In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol 43. Edited by Zanna MP, Olson JM. Academic Press/Elsevier; 2010:117-158.
 6. Khan U, Dhar R: **Licensing effect in consumer choice.** *J Market Res* 2006, **43**:259-266.
 7. Effron DA, Cameron JS, Monin B: **Endorsing Obama licenses favoring Whites.** *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2009, **45**:590-593.
 8. Effron DA, Monin B: **Letting people off the hook: when do good deeds excuse transgressions?** *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2010, **36**:1618-1634.
 9. Polman E, Pettit NC, Wiesenfeld BM: **Effects of wrongdoer status on moral licensing.** *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2013, **49**:614-623.
 10. Effron DA: **Beyond “being good frees us to be bad:” moral self-licensing and the fabrication of moral credentials.** In *Cheating, Corruption, and Concealment: Roots of Unethical Behavior*. Edited by Van Lange PA, van Prooijen J-W. Cambridge University Press; 2015. (in press).
 11. Baumeister RF, Exline JJ: **Virtue, personality, and social relations: self control as the moral muscle.** *J Pers* 1999, **67**:1165-1194.
 12. Milkman KL, Rogers T, Bazerman MH: **Harnessing our inner angels and demons: what we have learned about want/should conflicts and how that knowledge can help us reduce short-sighted decision making.** *Perspect Psychol Sci* 2008, **3**:324-338.
 13. Tenbrunsel AE, Diekmann KA, Wade-Benzoni KA, Bazerman MH: **The ethical mirage: a temporal explanation as to why we are not as ethical as we think we are.** *Res Org Behav* 2010, **30**:153-173.
 14. Effron DA, Knowles ED: **Entitativity and intergroup bias: how belonging to a cohesive group allows people to express their prejudices.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2015, **108**:234-253.
 15. Hornsey MJ, Trembath M, Gunthorpe S: **‘You can criticize because you care’: identity attachment, constructiveness, and the intergroup sensitivity effect.** *Eur J Soc Psychol* 2004, **34**:499-518.
 16. Krumm AJ, Corning AF: **Who believes us when we try to conceal our prejudices? The effectiveness of moral credentials with in-groups versus out-groups.** *J Soc Psychol* 2008, **148**:689-709.
 17. Blanken I, van de Ven N, Zeelenberg M: **A meta-analytic review of moral licensing.** *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2015, **41**:540-558 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167215572134>.
- This meta-analysis finds an average moral self-licensing effect size of $d = .31$.
18. Brañas-Garza P, Brucheli M, Espinosa Alejos MP, García-Muñoz T: **Moral cleansing and moral licenses: experimental evidence.** *Econ Philos* 2013, **29**:199-212.
 19. Brown RP, Tamborski M, Wang X, Barnes CD, Mumford MD, Connelly S, Devenport LD: **Moral credentialing and the rationalization of misconduct.** *Ethics Behav* 2011, **21**:1-12.
 20. Chiou W-B, Yang C-C, Wan C-S: **Ironie effects of dietary supplementation: illusory invulnerability created by taking dietary supplements licenses health-risk behaviors.** *Psychol Sci* 2011, **22**:1081-1086.
 21. Clot S, Grolleau G, Ibanez L: **Smug alert! Exploring self-licensing behaviour in a cheating game.** *Econ Lett* 2014, **123**:191-194.
 22. Mann NH, Kawakami K: **The long, steep path to equality: progressing on egalitarian goals.** *J Exp Psychol Gen* 2012, **141**:187-197.

23. Sachdeva S, Iliev R, Medin DL: **Sinning saints and saintly sinners: the paradox of moral self-regulation.** *Psychol Sci* 2009, **20**:523-528.
24. Zhong C-B, Ku G, Lount RB, Murnighan JK: **Compensatory ethics.** *J Bus Ethics* 2010, **92**:323-339.
25. Hofmann W, Wisneski DC, Brandt MJ, Skitka LJ: **Morality in everyday life.** *Science* 2014, **345**:1340-1343.
This investigation documents moral self-licensing in people's daily lives.
26. Tiefenbeck V, Staake T, Roth K, Sachs O: **For better or for worse? Empirical evidence of moral licensing in a behavioral energy conservation campaign.** *Energy Policy* 2013, **57**:160-171.
27. Klotz AC, Bolino MC: **Citizenship and counterproductive work behavior: a moral licensing view.** *Acad Manag Rev* 2013, **38**:292-306.
28. Ormiston ME, Wong EM: **License to ill: the effects of corporate social responsibility and CEO moral identity on corporate social irresponsibility.** *Pers Psychol* 2013, **66**:861-893.
This investigation demonstrates moral self-licensing at the organizational level.
29. Blanken I, van de Ven N, Zeelenberg M, Meijers MH: **Three attempts to replicate the moral licensing effect.** *Soc Psychol* 2014, **45**:232-238.
30. Effron DA, Miller DT, Monin B: **Inventing racist roads not taken: the licensing effect of immoral counterfactual behaviors.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2012, **103**:916-932.
31. Effron DA, Monin B, Miller DT: **The unhealthy road not taken: licensing indulgence by exaggerating counterfactual sins.** *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2013, **49**:573-578.
This research documents how people exaggerate the unhealthiness of foregone food options to license dietary indulgence.
32. Fishbach A, Dhar R: **Goals as excuses or guides: the liberating effect of perceived goal progress on choice.** *J Consum Res* 2005, **32**:370-377.
33. Khan U, Dhar R: **Where there is a way, there is a will? The effect of future choices on self-control.** *J Exp Psychol Gen* 2007, **136**:277-288.
34. Urbaszat D, Herman CP, Polivy J: **Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we diet: effects of anticipated deprivation on food intake in restrained and unrestrained eaters.** *J Abnorm Psychol* 2002, **111**:396.
35. Cascio J, Plant EA: **Prospective moral licensing: does anticipating doing good later allow you to be bad now?** *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2015, **56**:110-116.
In these studies, pledging to donate blood in the future licensed people to express overtly prejudiced views in the present.
36. Kouchaki M: **Vicarious moral licensing: the influence of others' past moral actions on moral behavior.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2011, **101**:702-715.
37. Merritt AC, Effron DA, Fein S, Savitsky K, Tuller DM, Monin B: **The strategic pursuit of moral credentials.** *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2012, **48**:774-777.
38. Bradley-Geist JC, King EB, Skorinko J, Hebl MR, McKenna C: **Moral credentialing by association: the importance of choice and relationship closeness.** *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2010, **36**:1564-1575.
39. Kronick I, Knäuper B: **Temptations elicit compensatory intentions.** *Appetite* 2010, **54**:398-401.
40. Effron DA: **Making mountains of morality from molehills of virtue: threat causes people to overestimate their moral credentials.** *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2014, **40**:972-985.
This research suggests that people are more likely to interpret their past behavior as moral credentials when they anticipate needing evidence of their morality in the future.
41. Conway P, Peetz J: **When does feeling moral actually make you a better person? Conceptual abstraction moderates whether past moral deeds motivate consistency or compensatory behavior.** *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2012, **38**:907-919.
42. Cornelissen G, Bashshur MR, Rode J: **Rules or consequences? The role of ethical mindsets in moral dynamics.** *Psychol Sci* 2013, **24**:482-488.
This work suggests that moral self-licensing occurs when people are in an outcome-based mindset, whereas moral self-consistency occurs when people in a rules-based mindset.
43. Singh S, Teoh VY: **Enhancing pro-social behavior among college students: exploring the role of abstract mindset.** *J Law Soc Sci* 2014, **3**:28-32.
44. Susewind M, Hoelzl E: **A matter of perspective: why past moral behavior can sometimes encourage and other times discourage future moral striving.** *J Appl Soc Psychol* 2014, **44**:201-209.
This paper demonstrates moral self-licensing when virtuous behavior is framed as progress towards moral goals, and moral self-consistency when virtuous behavior is framed as commitment to such goals.
45. Gneezy A, Imas A, Brown A, Nelson LD, Norton MI: **Paying to be nice: consistency and costly prosocial behavior.** *Manag Sci* 2012, **58**:179-187.
This paper suggests that costless prosocial behavior is more likely than costly prosocial behavior to license dishonesty.
46. Joosten A, van Dijke M, Van Hiel A, De Cremer D: **Feel good, do good!? On consistency and compensation in moral self-regulation.** *J Bus Ethics* 2013, **123**:1-14.
This research suggests that moral self-licensing is more likely to occur when people are cognitively depleted.
47. Aquino K, Reed A II: **The self-importance of moral identity.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2002, **83**:1423-1440.
48. Strohminger N, Nichols S: **The essential moral self.** *Cognition* 2014, **131**:159-171.
49. Bem DJ: **Self-perception theory.** In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol 6. Edited by Berkowitz L. Academic Press; 1972:1-62.
50. Freedman JL, Fraser SC: **Compliance without pressure: the foot-in-the-door technique.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 1966, **4**:195-202.
51. Hardy SA, Carlo G: **Identity as a source of moral motivation.** *Hum Dev* 2005, **48**:232-256.
52. Reed A, Aquino KF II: **Moral identity and the expanding circle of moral regard toward out-groups.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2003, **84**:1270-1286.