When Virtue Leads to Villainy:

Advances in Research on Moral Self-Licensing

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Abstract

Acting virtuously can subsequently free people to act less-than-virtuously. We review recent

insights into this *moral self-licensing effect*: (a) It is reliable, though modestly-sized, and

occurs in both real-world and laboratory contexts; (b) Planning to do good, reflecting on

foregone bad deeds, or observing ingroup members' good deeds is sufficient to license less

virtuous behavior; (c) 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; (d) 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. (*109 words*)

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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 (a) reliability and generalizability, (b) sources of moral license, (c) strategies for creating a moral license, and (d) 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.[1] 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

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[1] 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.

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., 18,19-24], 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 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 now [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), thereby exaggerating the racism of the road not taken [30].

People can also create moral credentials by reinterpreting their past behavior. Performing a minor good deed—e.g., 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 vs. 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 (vs. self-consistency) is most likely to occur when people focus concretely on their virtuous behavior and its consequences (vs. abstractly on its implications for their moral values and identity; 41,42,43) [41-43], when the virtuous behavior is framed as evidence of progress towards a moral goal (vs. a signal of commitment to that goal) [32,44], when the virtuous behavior is costless (vs. costly) [45], or when people have depleted (vs. 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 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.[2] 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.

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[2] 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].

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.

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