

**Moral Coherence and Political Conflict**

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### **Moral Coherence and Political Conflict**

We don't always think about morality. But when we do, we think Dick Cheney.

This is not meant as a partisan statement. On the contrary, we see the former Vice President's moral beliefs as illustrating an all-too-human pattern that readers of any political persuasion will recognize.

On virtually every issue of the day, Mr. Cheney's views epitomize the conservative end of the political spectrum. He is a strong supporter of military intervention abroad and aggressive interrogation of terrorist suspects at home. He is pro-business and anti-taxes, an enthusiastic supporter of gun rights but hostile toward abortion rights, and dismissive of scientific research documenting the dangers of global climate change.

But there is one issue where Mr. Cheney's views are surprisingly liberal. In 2009 he declared his support for same-sex marriage. It is challenging to construct a principled ideological view that can integrate this one anomalous attitude with Mr. Cheney's otherwise overwhelmingly conservative constellation of political beliefs. The former Vice President has shown a libertarian streak at times, but his staunch opposition to drug law liberalization, aggressive support for foreign military intervention, and commitment to a powerful executive branch make a principled explanation for his same-sex marriage position seem implausible.

On the other hand, Mr. Cheney's moral belief system becomes instantly understandable once we know that his daughter Mary is openly lesbian, married to a woman and parent to two of his grandchildren. The desire to view one's children in a positive light is a tendency that most people (and any parent) will recognize immediately. This tendency should make questioning the morality of his daughter's chosen lifestyle uncomfortable, and inconsistent with the knowledge that she is otherwise very much the morally-upstanding woman that he raised and continues to love very much. Indeed, Mr. Cheney is not the only politician whose feelings about same-sex marriage have evolved, oftentimes evoked by the discovery that a child, another family member, or a close friend is gay. The arc of moral reasoning may be long, but it often seems to bend toward viewing those we love (including ourselves) in a positive light.

In this chapter we will argue for this view that moral and political beliefs arise from an intuitive process infused with emotion and thus subject to extraneous affective influences. We will describe research demonstrating how these processes can alter reasoning in ways that lead political partisans to see their moral views as grounded in principle and supported by facts. We will also discuss how this tendency to "factualize" moral intuitions, compounded by our insensitivity to our own susceptibility to this tendency, contributes to political conflict by creating mirror image misperceptions in which both liberals and conservatives come to see their political adversaries as hypocritical and intellectually challenged. Our overarching goal is to better understand the psychological factors contributing to the hyper-partisan state of contemporary American politics by situating them within our current scientific understanding of moral reasoning processes. And even more broadly, we will show how these processes affecting moral reasoning can be seen as yet another example of a long recognized tendency for people to confuse what they value with what they believe is true.

#### **Thinking from the Top Down**

If you asked a group of average people why they hold their particular position on some moral political issue such as capital punishment, many would likely tell you a story about reasoning.

They might describe some basic values and principles they learned as a child or adolescent, and how through a thoughtful process of logical consideration they applied those principles, informed by basic facts about the world, to generate their opinions.

Some opinions may actually be formed through this kind of reasoned analysis, combining principles and facts to form a considered position on the matter at hand. But a crucial lesson learned from decades of social psychological research is that quite often the process proceeds in precisely the opposite fashion.

Beginning with work by Piaget (1953), Bartlett (1958), Bruner (1957), and others (e.g., Allport, 1955) on schema-based processing and perceptual sets, and continuing with huge bodies of research on priming (e.g., Bargh & Chartrand, 1999), expectancy confirmation processes (e.g., Darley & Fazio, 1980) and motivated reasoning (e.g., Kunda, 1990), psychologists have demonstrated repeatedly that perception and judgment processes are organized and directed as much by higher-order concepts, expectancies, and motivations than by specific aspects of the target stimulus. In a seminal paper, Haidt (2001) identified moral reasoning as particularly susceptible to this kind of top-down reasoning process. Challenging the rationalist view that had dominated moral psychology during the previous decades (Kohlberg, 1969; Turiel, 1978), Haidt argued that when ordinary people form moral judgments, they are seldom the product of some reasoned, principle-based analysis. Instead, moral evaluations result primarily from “gut” intuitions, implicit feelings that some act is morally good or morally bad. When moral reasoning occurs, Haidt (2001; 2007; 2012) posits that it is almost always due to social demands to explain or defend our moral intuitions to others, in which case “reasoning” operates in a post hoc fashion guided by, and providing justification for, those pre-existing moral intuitions.

Stated another way, what people colloquially refer to as “reasoning” more closely resembles arguing than rational deliberation (Mercier & Sperber, 2011), and people are more aptly characterized as intuitive lawyers than intuitive scientists (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Ditto, Pizarro, & Tannenbaum, 2009; Tetlock, 2002). People may prefer to see their reasoning as bottom-up, rationally moving from evidence to conclusions, but research clearly shows that the process flows the other way as well, with desired or expected conclusions organizing cognitive processes from the top down in a way that privileges evidence for exactly the conclusions that people prefer or expect (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Kunda, 1990). Just as attorneys are motivated by professional duty to only present evidence that supports their client’s claims, everyday people are subject to a variety of motivations that can lead them to recruit evidence selectively to support their favored verdicts.

### **Moral Coherence and Factualization**

But how does one recruit evidence to support a moral view? How can a father like Mr. Cheney, motivated to see his daughter’s life choices in a positive light, generate reasons to support the morality of same-sex marriage?

It is important to first note two key differences between motivated reasoning and legal argumentation. Attorneys are fully cognizant that they are choosing evidence selectively to present a case in support of a particular conclusion. With motivated reasoning, however, the individual’s explicit motivation is to see the world accurately, as it would do people little good to know that they had simply constructed a view of the world that was “rigged” to conform to their hopes and desires. Instead, preferences affect information processing in subtle ways that

advantage preferred conclusions even when people feel that they are approaching the judgment problem in good faith (e.g., Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Ditto, Scepansky, Munro, Apanovitch & Lockhart, 1998; Norton, Vandello & Darley, 2004). Attorneys are also free to gather and present in trial any evidence that supports their position, no matter how implausible, one-sided, or internally inconsistent their argument might be. In contrast, because people faced with everyday judgments are interested (at least explicitly) in forming an accurate view of the world, a view that fits logically with other facts they understand to be true, what they come to believe is constrained by this “reality.” People do not believe whatever they want to believe no matter its implausibility (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Kunda, 1990; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). Instead, motivated reasoning produces what is best construed as a compromise between what the individual wishes were true and what can plausibly be believed based on the available data (Ditto, 2009; Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958).

A theoretical perspective that captures this nuanced process well is that of explanatory coherence (Read, Vanman, & Miller, 1997; Thagard, 2004). Coherence-based models posit that individuals construct beliefs through a process of parallel constraint satisfaction (e.g., Simon, Krawczyk, & Holyoak, 2004). They resemble classic cognitive consistency theories, but reject simplifying assumptions about linear causation in favor of a more dynamic view in which beliefs, feelings, goals, and actions all influence one another, and are adjusted iteratively toward a point of maximal internal consistency or “coherence.” That is, very much consistent with the image of motivated reasoning sketched out above, coherence-based models depict people as striving in good faith to integrate and make sense of the information available to them, but doing so in a way that includes influence from both the bottom-up (e.g., adjusting conclusions to fit facts) and the top-down (e.g., adjusting facts to fit conclusions).

There is little reason to think that moral judgments are immune from coherence pressures. For example, research has shown that beliefs about the extent to which an action is controllable and intentional influence moral evaluations of that action (Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995). This is the normative, bottom-up process. Studies have also shown, however, that the reverse causal flow occurs; moral evaluation of an action can influence the extent to which perceivers infer that it must have been controlled and intended (Alicke, 2000; Knobe, 2003; Walster, 1966).

We believe that a similar process of mutual influence operates in moral justifications more generally. There are two primary ways that moral evaluations are justified. The first is by tying an act to a broad, underlying principle or rule. This is the essence of what philosophers refer to as deontological morality, in which certain acts are seen as inherently right or inherently wrong, independent of their consequences. For example, an individual may assert that a particular act of terrorism is morally wrong because it violates the principle that combatants should never intentionally target and kill innocent civilians. According to a deontological ethic, this principle is broad and inviolate, and should apply even if intentionally killing a small number of civilians might result in highly beneficial outcomes such as saving the lives of many more civilians than were killed in the original attack.

The second primary way to justify a moral belief makes precisely the opposite claim: that the morality of acts is fundamentally about consequences. This moral view encompasses a variety of related positions that are broadly referred to as consequentialist or utilitarian, according to which acts are judged as moral to the extent that they maximize positive outcomes. For example, an individual may assert that the use of atomic weapons against Japan in World War II was morally

justified, despite the horrific death toll, because hastening a Japanese surrender saved many more lives than were lost in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

As in the examples above, deontological and consequentialist logic often produce competing moral conclusions, and the tension between them provides the dynamic underlying classic moral dilemmas such as the well-known trolley problem (Foot, 1994). They are similar, however, in that both provide a rationale for moral evaluations that resembles the kinds of justifications typically provided for more objectively verifiable descriptive judgments. That is, descriptive statements are justified with some fact-based rationale, e.g., “Smoking cigarettes is bad for your health *because* it increases your chances of heart and lung disease.” Both deontological and consequentialist rationales allow moral justifications to assume a similar structure, e.g., “Terrorism is morally wrong *because* it is never justified to kill innocent civilians” or “Dropping atomic bombs on Japan was morally justified *because* it saved more civilian lives than it cost”.

To the extent that individuals ground their moral intuitions in either broad principle or a favorable cost-benefit analysis, moral judgments become subjectively *factualized*; experienced less like arbitrary preferences and more like rational, defensible, “objective” assessments (Ditto & Liu, 2012). Importantly, this should be true whether the moral evaluation was actually generated from the bottom up based on principle or cost-benefit analyses, or whether these rationales are generated post hoc (from the top down) to explain a gut moral intuition.

Let us return now to the predicament of our former Vice President. Emotional preferences are not generally considered reasonable justifications for moral judgments. As Mr. Cheney struggles—just as countless fathers and mothers have before him—to reconcile his conservative moral sensibilities with his affection for his daughter, he should feel more comfortable to the extent that he can ground his intuitive desire to embrace his daughter’s lifestyle in broad moral principle (e.g., a libertarian ethic that prioritizes individual freedom) or recruit facts suggesting that same-sex marriage has few social costs relative to its many social benefits (e.g., it promotes stable families without posing a threat to the well being of children or heterosexual marriage).

In the following sections we will review empirical evidence that the judgments of political partisans show both of these patterns, relying on principle selectively to support intuitively palatable moral evaluations, and recruiting facts selectively to make actions that feel moral seem effective and beneficial as well.

### **The Problem with Principle**

The job of the U.S. Supreme Court is to uphold the fundamental principles of justice enumerated in the U.S. Constitution. Arguably the most fundamental of those fundamental principles is the freedom of speech guaranteed in the First Amendment. It is striking then, albeit not completely surprising, that in an analysis of over 50 years of Supreme Court decisions involving First Amendment claims (Epstein, Parker, & Segal, 2014), substantial ideological bias was revealed: liberal justices were more receptive than conservative justices to First Amendment arguments protecting liberal-friendly speech (e.g., public employee whistleblowing), but conservative justices were more receptive than liberal ones to similar arguments protecting conservative-friendly speech (e.g., a club’s right to exclude gay members).

Presidents, pundits, and jurists all want to be seen as people of principle. The term implies an individual of high character, whose judgments about difficult moral issues are not made haphazardly, but rather reflect deeply held commitments that cannot be breached even when the

immediate benefits of violating the principle seem obvious. But this is precisely the problem with principle. Principles are by definition broad, widely applicable rules that should not be applied nor ignored selectively, and their ability to provide intellectual grounding for specific moral judgments derives directly from this generality. But generality is what makes principled judgment both intellectually and emotionally challenging. The same general rule that explains and justifies a desirable course of action in one case will often compel less palatable action in another. And yet, if one relies on a given principle only when it is convenient, the normative status of the principle as a justification for any specific moral claim is weakened, and the door is opened to charges of intellectual incoherence or hypocrisy.

Anecdotal evidence of the selective use of principle in political speech is too voluminous to fully recount here. Democrats tout the virtues of the Senate filibuster as an essential right of the minority party when Republicans are in control (calling attempts to amend it the “nuclear option”), then vote to limit its applicability a few years later when they have regained the majority in the Senate. Republicans unsurprisingly showed exactly the opposite pattern of preferences (Seitz-Wald, 2012). Perhaps most iconically, the Presidency of the U.S. was decided in *Bush v. Gore* with the five most conservative Supreme Court Justices (whose previous court decisions frequently favored state-sovereignty over federal intervention) deciding in this case that it was appropriate to overturn the Florida State Supreme Court’s ruling (virtually guaranteeing the election of George W. Bush), while the four more liberal (and historically more federalism-friendly) justices favored allowing the state court’s ruling to stand. Political flip-flopping of this kind is so regular that showing back-to-back video of politicians making conflicting appeals to principle is a central feature of the popular and influential comedy program *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

Anecdotes and TV shows are not controlled experiments, of course, but the selective use of principle is exactly what would be expected from a moral coherence perspective. Rather than using principle to generate specific moral preferences bottom-up, it will often be the case that political partisans selectively recruit particular principles top-down based on whether or not that principle coheres with (and thus reinforces) their intuitive moral reaction to that specific set of circumstances. Because similar situations can generate quite different moral preferences, this top-down privileging of intuition-reinforcing principles will frequently result in individuals offering one principle to justify their desired course of action in one situation, but rejecting the applicability of that very same principle in a seemingly similar situation.

A number of experiments have now shown just this kind of selective use of principle by political partisans (Knowles & Ditto, 2012; Uhlmann, Pizarro, Tannenbaum, & Ditto, 2009). The basic approach in each study was to present participants with a moral dilemma in which they must choose between an action consistent with a deontological rationale (i.e., refusing to engage in a morally questionable act for a greater good) and one consistent with a consequentialist action (i.e., agreeing to engage in a morally questionable act for a greater good). Importantly, the scenario included extraneous information that would be expected to evoke differing intuitive reactions to the action alternatives depending on the participant’s political ideology.

In one study for example (Uhlmann et al., 2009, Study 1a), college students were presented with a modified version of the footbridge dilemma in which the morality of pushing one man to his death to save the lives of many others must be assessed. Half of the participants were faced with a decision about whether to push a man named “Tyrone Payton” into the path of an

oncoming train to save “100 members of the New York Philharmonic,” while the other half had to decide whether to push a man named “Chip Ellsworth III” to save “100 members of the Harlem Jazz Orchestra.” The goal, of course, was to lead participants to infer that in the first case their decision involved whether to sacrifice one African-American life to save 100 that were mostly White, and in the second case whether to sacrifice one White life to save 100 that were mostly African-American. After reading the scenarios, participants completed a series of scales assessing their endorsement of consequentialism as a general moral principle (e.g., “It is sometimes necessary to allow the death of an innocent person in order to save a larger number of innocent people”).

The results revealed that there was a tendency for all participants to be more likely to invoke a consequentialist justification for sacrificing a man with a stereotypically White American name than one with a stereotypically African-American name. When participant’s political orientation was entered into the regression, however, a significant interaction effect was found. Students endorsing a conservative political ideology showed a non-significant reversal of the overall trend, expressing slightly greater support for consequentialism when considering the fate of Tyrone than Chip. As students became more liberal, however, they were increasingly likely to invoke a consequentialist rationale for sacrificing Chip’s life, but a deontological rationale for saving Tyrone’s. The same interaction pattern was replicated in another study using a more diverse sample and the lifeboat dilemma, in which participants must choose whether to throw a dying man (again, named either Chip or Tyrone) overboard to save the other passengers in a sinking life boat (Uhlmann et al., 2009, Study 1b). Liberals were again more likely to sacrifice Chip than Tyrone, whereas conservatives showed a slight tendency in the opposite direction.

These studies provide evidence of the selective use of principle, at least among political liberals. All participants were faced with the identical moral dilemma of deciding whether to sacrifice one man’s life for the lives of many others. When the individual to be sacrificed was apparently African-American, liberals were expected to be particularly squeamish about sacrificing his life for the lives of a larger group of people that seemed likely to be mostly White. In this case, liberals more than conservatives endorsed the deontological principle that sacrificing one life to save many is not morally justified. However, when the same choice had to be made involving a White (and seemingly patrician) victim and a mostly African-American group of individuals to be saved, liberals’ squeamishness was expected to dissipate, and in fact, liberals were found to be more likely than conservatives to reject the deontological rationale and endorse instead the consequentialist principle that the potential to save many African-American lives does justify the sacrifice of a single White one.

The obvious question that arises from the Chip-Tyrone studies is why political conservatives showed little evidence of principle switching. Given the distain for racial prejudice found among most Americans, and American college students in particular, conservatives were not expected to show a full reversal of the pattern found in liberals. Moral Foundations Theory (Graham et al., 2013), as well as a wealth of other research, suggests that race, with its deep connotations of inequality and victimization, is a particular moral hot spot for political liberals. Because political conservatives, on the other hand, are not as sensitized to race as their liberal counterparts, they were not expected to favor White lives over African-American ones, but simply to lack liberals’ highly accessible intuitions regarding inequality and thus to respond in a more evenhanded fashion to the Chip and Tyrone scenarios (both affectively and cognitively) than would liberals.

This does not mean, however, that conservatives are more principled than liberals, no matter what Republican politicians' and pundits' public devotion to principled decision-making would have one believe. It is quite possible to find issues that evoke conservative moral intuitions more so than liberal ones. For example, just as racial and other underrepresented minorities act as sacred "totems" to the liberal tribe, the U.S. military has a similar totemic quality for political conservatives. Moral Foundations Theory posits that conservatives place greater moral value than liberals on ingroup loyalty, and for many political conservatives, patriotism is a sacred value and the American military represents the ultimate symbol of national pride. Conservatives should, therefore, be more likely than liberals to give the American military moral leeway in evaluating their behavior, and to make a moral distinction between the lives of Americans and those of Non-Americans.

To examine this prediction, Uhlmann et al. (2009, Study 3) presented participants with one of two military scenarios. Half of the participants received a scenario describing American military leaders deciding to carry out an attack on Iraqi insurgent leaders in order to prevent the future deaths of American troops. The other half read about Iraqi insurgent leaders deciding to carry out an attack on leaders of the American military in order to prevent future deaths of Iraqi insurgents. In both cases, it was explicitly stated that the attackers (whether American or Iraqi) did not want nor intend to cause civilian casualties, but in both cases the attack did. As in the Chip-Tyrone study, participants then expressed their endorsement of consequentialist moral principles. Perhaps not surprisingly, there was an overall tendency such that as political conservatism increased, so did a more permissive (i.e., consequentialist) view of any kind of collateral damage. More to the point, however, conservatives were significantly more likely to endorse consequentialist principles after reading about American-caused casualties than after reading about Iraqi-caused casualties. Liberals, on the other hand, showed a non-significant tendency in the opposite direction, viewing Iraqi-caused casualties in consequentialist terms, but being slightly more deontological when collateral damage was caused by American soldiers. Importantly, Uhlmann and colleagues (2009) replicated this effect in a follow up experiment (Study 4) by non-consciously priming participants with words related either to patriotism (e.g., American, loyal) or multiculturalism (e.g., diversity, equal). When reading about American-caused casualties, participants who were primed with patriotism were more likely to endorse consequentialist collateral damage than participants primed with multiculturalism. Replacing a non-manipulated individual difference variable (political ideology) with an experimental manipulation provides important evidence for the causal role of moral intuition in selective principle use.

As a moral issue, collateral damage scenarios pit deontological and consequentialist logics against one another in much the same way as the trolley or lifeboat dilemmas. Together, Uhlmann et al.'s (2009) data suggest that if the right moral button is pushed, political partisans – whether conservative or liberal – will invoke whichever of these moral stances best supports their ideologically-based moral intuitions. Liberals are consequentialists when considering White lives but show a deontological reluctance to sacrifice an African-American one. Conservatives can justify civilian casualties caused by American military action as a necessary evil, while condemning the morality of Iraqi soldiers when their actions inadvertently cause similar civilian carnage.

From a moral coherence perspective, selective reliance on principle does not represent a conscious, strategic attempt to build an argument for one's chosen moral position the way that an



attorney deliberately builds a one-sided case in her client's favor. Rather, individuals prompted to explain or defend a moral choice (as they are asked to do in psychological experiments, and more importantly, in political debates, discussions, and negotiations) attempt to make sense of their feelings and thoughts on the matter. Because most people find both deontological and consequentialist rationales intuitively plausible (i.e., to almost anyone except moral philosophers, sometimes the ends seem to justify the means and sometimes they don't), they are likely to find most plausible whichever moral stance fits coherently with their preferred moral conclusion. If people actually applied principles consistently to moral judgments in a bottom-up fashion – always approaching moral quandaries as either principled deontologists or principled consequentialists for example – we would expect considerable consistency in the moral rationales offered across morally similar situations. But because moral principles are often recruited *from* specific moral situations rather than applied *to* them, people will often offer what seem like logically incompatible rationales for arguably identical moral judgments.

But what if it was argued that the moral rationales offered by Uhlmann et al.'s (2009) participants were not necessarily incompatible, but rather that these individuals might be consciously relying on nuanced, situation-specific moral rules? That is, perhaps our participants were not recruiting general moral principles selectively, but rather were naïve particularists (Dancy, 1993, 2004) cognizant of the fact that they were using different moral rules to evaluate African-American versus White or American versus Iraqi lives.

There are two primary reasons to discount this particularist explanation for the observed data (see Ditto et al., 2009, or Uhlmann et al., 2009, for a more detailed treatment of this concern). First, 92% of participants in Uhlmann et al.'s Chip-Tyrone lifeboat study said after the fact that their responses would not have differed if the target person was of another race, and 87% of participants in a pilot study reported by these same researchers explicitly rejected the idea that race was a relevant moral factor in life or death decisions.

Second, if participants in Uhlmann et al.'s (2009) studies were consciously using different moral rules to evaluate the worth of White versus African-American lives, then they should report differing responses across the Chip and Tyrone scenarios if both scenarios were judged together in a within-subjects design, just as they gave differing responses when this information was manipulated in a between subjects design. In fact, when Uhlmann and colleagues conducted a within-subjects version of the Chip and Tyrone study (Study 2), participant's responses were almost perfectly consistent across the two versions ( $r = .9$ ). This consistency produced a particularly striking pattern for liberals, as it led them to demonstrate a complete reversal of their initial bias. Liberal participants evaluating the first scenario replicated the results of the initial Chip-Tyrone study: consequentialism was endorsed more strongly when deciding the fate of Chip than Tyrone. When these same liberal participants then read the alternative scenario (those reading about Chip first then read about Tyrone, and vice versa), they were suddenly more consequentialist toward Tyrone than Chip. Participants seemed to perceive a strong constraint to remain consistent in their use of moral principles across the two scenarios, as would be the case if one believed the principle being applied was a general one. This pronounced carry-over effect, together with participants' explicit rejection of race as a relevant moral consideration, provides strong support for our moral coherence account.

There seems to be solid evidence to believe that political partisans recruit principles selectively to support ideologically palatable conclusions. This selectivity serves to ground moral

intuitions as exemplars of broad moral principle, making moral opinions feel like moral facts, and may even affect the judgments of the ostensibly principle-minded occupants of the highest court in the land (Epstein et al., 2013; Furgeson, Babcock, & Shane, 2008). American justice is frequently said to be blind, but it may be more accurate to say that it often sees the world through red- or blue-colored glasses.

### **What is Moral is Effective**

Perhaps the most striking feature of the venomous culture war raging in contemporary American politics is the dramatic difference in factual beliefs between the liberal and conservative factions. Belief in the reality of global climate change is the most obvious example, but red and blue America show factual divergences in any number of areas, including whether gun possession promotes or reduces gun violence, whether social welfare programs promote or discourage economic growth, and the effectiveness of “enhanced” interrogation techniques in combatting terrorism, just to name a few.

Almost certainly the new media environment contributes to this divergence. Advances in television and computer technology have opened up a world teeming with entertainment and information options, many carefully tailored to fit specific consumer interests (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013). A host of print publications, television news shows, and internet sites are clearly labeled for partisan consumption and allow citizens to expose themselves selectively to information congenial to their political inclinations (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008; Sunstein, 2007).

But ideological selectivity does not end with exposure. Media silos are never completely impermeable, and we are all exposed on occasion to factual information that challenges our preferred beliefs about the state of national and world affairs. Such information is not likely to be processed in an even-handed manner. Beginning with Lord, Ross, and Lepper’s (1979) highly influential demonstration of what they termed “biased assimilation” processes, a long tradition of research has confirmed that strong attitudes and ideological commitments guide information processing such that scientific data and other fact-based information that challenge one’s political preferences is subjected to more intense critical scrutiny than is more politically congenial information (Crawford, Jussim, Cain, & Cohen, 2013; Kahan, 2013; Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, & Braman, 2011; Kopko, Mckinnon, Budziak, Devine, & Nawara, 2011; Munro & Ditto, 1997; Scurich & Shniderman, in press; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Some have even argued that because of our skeptical approach to information that challenges our political beliefs, exposure to such information can actually backfire, reinforcing rather than diminishing the challenged belief (Lord et al., 1979; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Redlawsk, 2002; but see also Miller, McHoskey, Bane, & Dowd, 1993).

It seems likely that both selective exposure and selective interpretation processes contribute to the fact war between the liberal and conservative wings of American politics. But the question most relevant to us here is why political partisans are attracted to certain kinds of facts and not others. That is, what is it specifically that makes certain factual beliefs reinforce certain political beliefs?

If you examine closely the various fact gaps between liberals and conservatives, many of them share a particular quality: political partisans favor facts suggesting that the policies they believe are the most morally praiseworthy are also the most pragmatically beneficial. For

example, many conservatives see gun ownership as an important moral right, and also tend to believe that increasing gun ownership will lead to decreases in criminal activity (e.g., Lott, 1998). Liberals, on the other hand, are more morally disapproving of gun ownership, and also tend to believe that it increases rather than decreases crime (e.g., Anglemyer, Horvath, & Rutherford, 2014). Conversely, liberals tend to see social welfare programs (e.g., the minimum wage, unemployment insurance) as both morally admirable and economically stimulative, whereas conservatives often view them as simply rewarding the unproductive, and thus both morally dubious and economically counterproductive.

This psychological link between morality and effectiveness is interesting because an essential aspect of moral evaluation is its conceptual independence from pragmatic considerations. The very essence of deontological judgment, for example, is that some actions are seen as morally wrong (e.g., pushing a person in front of an oncoming trolley) even when engaging in those actions would result in the best consequences (e.g., one person dying rather than five). Similarly, behavioral scientists describe some values as “sacred” or “protected,” meaning that they are given disproportionate or even infinite weight in decision making, and thus distort rational, utilitarian cost-benefit considerations (e.g., Atran, Axelrod, & Davis, 2007; Baron & Spranca, 1997; Bartels & Medin, 2007; Tetlock, 2003). In short, morality is about doing what is right, not doing what is best, and although consequentialist morality serves to conflate these two standards to an important degree (essentially defining what is right *as* what is best), virtually every ordinary person—and all but the most dogged consequentialist philosophers (e.g., Singer, 1993)—would acknowledge that there are substantial limits on the extent to which beneficial ends can justify any means (e.g., harvesting a healthy person’s organs to save the lives of numerous others).

But consider the issue from a coherence perspective. When people’s moral intuitions conflict with cold, cost-benefit calculations, one option is to acknowledge and accept this conflict, maintaining, for example, that capital punishment is morally wrong even though it deters future crime. A half century of psychological research, however, has demonstrated that this kind of cognitive conflict is psychologically unstable, and that mental systems evolve naturally toward reducing conflict by changing, adding, or altering the importance of the component cognitions (Cooper, 2007; Festinger, 1957; Read et al., 1997). In coherence terms, believing that capital punishment is morally wrong but practically effective is more complicated and less coherent than a view in which one’s moral and pragmatic beliefs about capital punishment are affectively consistent. Because the implicit nature of moral intuitions makes them difficult to change, coherence pressures should primarily operate toward bringing beliefs about the costs and benefits of capital punishment in line with its moral evaluation, likely via the biased assimilation processes so well documented in political judgment (Lord & Taylor, 2009). People who believe capital punishment is morally wrong should be inclined to believe evidence suggesting that it is also an ineffective deterrent or that it involves substantial costs such as frequent wrongful executions, and find flaws in evidence to the contrary. People more comfortable with the morality of the death penalty on the other hand, should show the opposite pattern of acceptance and skepticism (Lord et al., 1979).

Like the selective use of moral principle, the selective recruitment of facts—a process we have referred to in the past as motivated consequentialism (Liu & Ditto, 2013)—should help to factualize moral intuitions by grounding them in a highly intuitive economic logic. It may be

difficult to argue for the morality of gun ownership on its own terms, but it becomes much easier when armed with facts suggesting that it produces tangible benefits like reducing crime.

If this kind of motivated consequentialism occurs, people's beliefs should show a natural pattern such that acts perceived as moral should also be perceived as having relatively few costs and many benefits. To test this prediction, we (Liu & Ditto, 2013, Study 2), surveyed over 1800 participants recruited from the website *YourMorals.org* regarding their beliefs about four controversial social issues, two of which were morally more objectionable to political conservatives than liberals (embryonic stem cell research, promoting contraception use in sexual education classes) and two of which were more morally objectionable to political liberals than conservatives (enhanced interrogations of terrorist suspects, capital punishment). Across all four issues, there were substantial positive associations between participants' judgments of an issue's morality and their factual beliefs about its effectiveness. For instance, the more strongly participants believed that embryonic stem cell research was morally acceptable, the more they believed such research would lead to cures for conditions like Alzheimer's Disease. Likewise, the more strongly participants believed that educating teens about contraception was morally wrong, the less effective they believed condoms were in preventing sexually-transmitted infections and the more they believed that these programs encouraged teens to have sex. These results held for perceptions of both the costs and benefits of each issue and after controlling for political orientation, gender, how informed participants said they were on an issue, and how morally convicted participants felt about an issue.

This psychological connection between morality and effectiveness is quite consistent with the operation of top-down moral coherence processes, but it might also be expected if the majority of our respondents were simply bottom-up consequentialists, deciding, for example, that stem cell research is morally acceptable precisely *because* it is effective. To partially address this issue, participants in the Liu and Ditto (2013) study were asked to rate whether each policy was inherently (i.e., deontologically) immoral, that is, immoral even if it achieved good consequences. This makes the findings more puzzling from a rationalist perspective in that participants were in essence saying that a policy like stem cell research was immoral even it did not produce negative consequences, but that it also just happened to produce negative consequences as well.

Of course, the ideal way to address issues of causal influence is to do it experimentally, manipulating participants' moral evaluation of an act and observing the effect of that manipulation on factual beliefs about the act. Accordingly, we asked undergraduate students to participate in a study on political beliefs in exchange for extra course credit (Liu & Ditto, 2013, Study 3). Participants were first asked to agree or disagree with statements assessing their beliefs about the inherent morality of the death penalty (e.g., "In terms of morality, it doesn't matter if the death penalty discourages would-be criminals, it is still morally wrong"), as well as factual statements about the death penalty (e.g., "The death penalty is an effective deterrent that prevents people from committing crimes"). They were then randomly assigned to either read an essay arguing that the death penalty is inherently morally wrong, or one arguing that the death penalty is inherently morally acceptable. These essays were designed to sway participants' moral evaluations, without referencing deterrence, effectiveness, or negative consequences of the death penalty. For example the pro-death penalty essay (ostensibly authored by a priest who had worked with death row inmates) argued that the death penalty is the best and most fair means of achieving justice for murder and that favoring the death penalty underscored the value of human life. The anti-death penalty essay (ostensibly written by a police officer who had witnessed many

gruesome murders) argued instead that the death penalty is inhumane and barbaric and that peace cannot be achieved by responding to violence with more violence. After reading the essays, participants answered the same moral judgment and factual belief questions they had answered previously.

As anticipated, the essays made a small, but statistically significant, impact on participants' evaluations of the death penalty's inherent morality. Compared to their pre-essay judgments, participants rated the death penalty as more inherently moral after reading the pro-death penalty essay, and as more inherently immoral after reading the anti-death penalty essay. More importantly, the essays were also effective at changing participants' factual beliefs about the consequences of capital punishment, such as whether capital punishment deterred people from committing crimes like murder, or whether it frequently led to wrongful executions of innocent people. Participants saw the death penalty as more effective (that is, as having greater benefits and fewer costs) after reading the pro-death penalty essay, and less effective after reading the anti-death penalty essay. It is worth emphasizing that participants changed their factual beliefs about capital punishment despite the fact that the essays they were comprised of purely principle-based arguments and never mentioned any costs or benefits associated with it. Furthermore, mediation analyses supported the causal role of moral belief change in factual belief change.

Together, the results of the Liu and Ditto (2013) studies illustrate another way that moral coherence processes serve to fortify the differing moral intuitions of political partisans, and help to explain the factual gulf seen between liberals and conservatives in the U.S. It is impressive to see someone take a moral stand, arguing that engaging in some act, like waterboarding suspected terrorists, is morally wrong despite the fact that it might be practically advantageous. But taking such a stand is psychologically challenging given the essential conflict it entails between moral impulse and a rational cost-benefit analysis. Our assertion is that such conflict tends to resolve itself by individuals selectively recruiting factual beliefs to bring cost-benefit analyses in line with moral evaluations. Believing that the most moral course of action is also the most beneficial course of action grounds moral evaluations in consequentialist logic, making them feel less like intuitions or opinions and more like justified beliefs, backed by facts and reason. The factual differences that mark the battle lines of the American culture war are best understood as each side's assertion that the policies they believe are *moral* also happen to be the most *effective*.

### **Coherence and the Culture War**

In the preceding sections we have described two lines of research suggesting that political partisans factualize their moral intuitions by creating coherent moral narratives in which policies that feel morally right are seen as grounded in principle and likely to produce optimal utilitarian outcomes. We believe this factualization process contributes to political conflict in two different ways, one intrapersonal and the other interpersonal.

At an intrapersonal level, moral coherence processes serve to fortify moral intuitions by transforming them into moral beliefs. In a sense, people are both moral intuitionists and moral realists. Our beliefs about right and wrong often derive from affective reactions rather than deliberative logic, but as many before us have noted, people approach the world as naïve realists — believing that their perceptions reflect the external world as it is — with little appreciation for how top-down processes shape subjective impressions (e.g., Ross & Ward, 1996). Committed partisans of the left and right hold differing moral views (Graham et al., 2013) and one can imagine a political world in which these are treated as simply legitimate differences of moral

opinion. However, to the extent that these opinions are experienced as crucial matters of principle, or as justified beliefs about what policy will produce the most beneficial outcomes, our feelings about moral right and wrong become things that can themselves be factually right or wrong (Goodwin & Darley, 2008), with one's own side's moral beliefs almost inevitably perceived as right and those of one's opponents equally inevitably perceived as wrong (in both senses of those words).

It is not hard to imagine that our natural tendency to integrate moral intuitions into coherent narratives about the "facts" of the world serves to reinforce partisan's beliefs in the validity of their side's policy positions and makes negotiated settlement of morally sensitive political issues considerably more difficult. It is hard for political opponents to find a middle ground when both sides view compromise as an abdication of principle and their own side's policy positions as demonstrably more effective than their opponents' policies (based on "objective" evidence).

But consider too how the factualization processes we describe are likely to be perceived and responded to at an interpersonal level. People are notorious for recognizing biased judgment in others, while failing to recognize it in themselves (Pronin, 2007). This suggests that while we are unlikely to appreciate the selective nature of our own side's use of principle and facts, that selectivity should be much more obvious to our political adversaries (just as theirs is more obvious to us). This differential sensitivity to bias seems likely to contribute to common and pernicious political stereotypes.

People who justify a given policy based on one principle, but reject that principle in a seemingly similar case, appear (and perhaps are) hypocritical. Charges of hypocrisy are a common insult hurled by both sides of the political aisle in American politics (just google Democratic or Republican hypocrisy—the images are the best part). An interesting manifestation of this recognition is the tendency of both sides to respond to political controversies by constructing counterfactuals implying the other side's double standards (e.g., "If a Republican made that remark, he would be vilified!"; "George W. Bush took far more vacation days when he was in office than President Obama has!").

The selective use of facts can foment similar negative perceptions. When another person adamantly believes a particular fact to be true that you just as adamantly believe is untrue, your first reaction would likely be to question that person's intelligence. Disparaging the intellectual competence of political adversaries is, of course, a common (and much enjoyed) pastime for partisans of both political persuasions. A similar and only slightly more benign response is to see individuals with differing factual beliefs as deluded victims of their own side's political propaganda (e.g., both liberal and conservative pundits are fond of using the Jonestown-inspired imagery that the other side must be "drinking the Kool-Aid").

The crucial point is that moral coherence effects can contribute to political conflict both by reinforcing and reifying the opposing moral positions held by each side, and by contributing to both sides' unflattering perception of their political opponents as unprincipled, unintelligent, and under the influence of a manipulative political elite. Importantly, a key dynamic in both processes is our differential sensitivity to bias in ourselves versus others. An interesting implication of the bias blind spot perspective (Pronin, 2007), as well as research on "motivated skepticism" (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Ditto et al., 1998), is that when political partisans on one side point out instances of bias in the other side, they will often be correct. Where both liberals and conservatives most clearly miss the mark is in their belief that they and their political brethren

are immune to the partisan biases that they see so clearly, and complain about so loudly, in the other side.

### **Conclusions**

Philosopher John Rawls was exceedingly clear about what he thought was required to govern a pluralistic society justly (Rawls, 1971). He argued that when a collection of people includes those of different moral or religious beliefs, political transactions should be restricted to a common intellectual currency that all sides would find persuasive: arguments based on universally-held values, evidence, and reason. Arguments based on the superiority of one moral position over another are acceptable in private thought and discussion, according to Rawls, but should be avoided in the public sphere where universal participation in decision-making is the ideal and where the decisions that are made affect the society as a whole.

Superficially, political discourse in the U.S. holds well to Rawls' idealized notion of public reason. Politicians and pundits make principled arguments for their favored policies and cite data to support how implementation of those policies will improve the lives of everyday citizens. But the research reported here suggests that in important ways public reason in contemporary American politics is little more than an illusion. Democrats and Republicans argue their positions citing principles they tout as universal and facts they believe are true, but the principles and facts they choose to utilize are shaped to support the superiority of their own particular moral sensibilities. Politicians of the left and right argue about runaway spending or intrusive regulation, framing them as general principles of effective governing, but a close look reveals that both sides are more than happy to spend money on government programs they see as moral (e.g., Democrats on social welfare, Republicans on defense) and to regulate behavior they see as immoral (e.g., discrimination for Democrats, abortion for Republicans). What seems like rational argumentation and cost-benefit consideration is just a veneer, hiding what in many ways is just a good old-fashioned clash of competing moral visions.

Perhaps this is stated too strongly, particularly given the notion at the heart of coherence-based models that judgments reflect bottom-up as well as top-down influences, and Rawls' recognition that his ideal of public reason was subject to many practical challenges similar to those discussed in this chapter (Rawls, 1997). But Rawls' ideas are important because they can be seen as a continuation of the Enlightenment project of admonishing people to distinguish empirically verifiable facts from inherently subjective values. David Hume was the first to discuss in detail the tendency of even the most sophisticated thinkers to blur this line between fact and value (Hume, 1740/1985), observing his fellow philosophers inappropriately draw prescriptive conclusions from descriptive statements in what he termed the is-ought problem.

This chapter makes a similar argument about the pervasive human tendency to blur the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive judgment, but the research we describe illustrates the opposite conceptual confusion, what we sometimes refer to as the other is-ought problem (Ditto & Liu, 2012). Where Hume was concerned primarily about the tendency to infer how the world ought to be from how the world is, our central concern is with the converse tendency to infer how the world is from how (each of us believes) it ought to be. Both are important fallacies, and the psychological dynamic underlying both of them – the desire for consistency between our descriptive and prescriptive views of the world – is itself wonderfully consistent with the logic of explanatory coherence.

The world makes most sense when what we value coheres with what we believe to be true. At an individual level, this tendency to construct morally coherent worlds likely provides some measure of comfort to people, like our former Vice President, as they struggle to reconcile the various and often contradictory threads of their moral, political and personal beliefs. At a societal level, however, the consequences of moral coherence processes are less comforting. As the data clearly show (at least to us), the tendency to confuse what we value with what we believe is an important source of the conflict, distrust, and mutual recrimination underlying the dysfunctional state of contemporary American politics.



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