

Morality and the religious mind: why theists and nontheists differ

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Religions have come to be intimately tied to morality and much recent research has shown that theists and nontheists differ in their moral behavior and decision making along several dimensions. Here we discuss how these empirical trends can be explained by fundamental differences in group commitment, motivations for prosociality, cognitive styles, and meta-ethics. We conclude by elucidating key areas of moral congruence.

Introduction

Despite declining religiosity across the world, a recent Pew survey found that, in most of the 40 tested countries, a clear majority of respondents agreed that believing in God is essential to morality [Pew Research Center (2014) *Worldwide, Many See Belief in God as Essential to Morality* (www.pewglobal.org/files/2014/03/Pew-Research-Center-Global-Attitudes-Project-Belief-in-God-Report-FINAL-March-13-2014.pdf)]. Rates were highest in Central Asia and West Africa, but even in the USA 53% agreed that belief was necessary to be a good person. Conversely, critics of religion have cited religious faith as being a roadblock to moral progress or, at best, motivation for doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. Do those who believe in a god or gods differ from those who do not in their morality and, if so, in what ways?

The difference between theists' and nontheists' morality is a topic of strong opinions. During the past several years, however, psychological research has revealed several consistent trends.

- (i) Theists tend to direct their prosociality more parochially toward ingroup members, compared with nontheists' more universal scope.
- (ii) The prosociality of theists and nontheists is motivated by different social cues.
- (iii) Theists and nontheists use different criteria to determine which actions are immoral.

We propose that these trends are the product of psychological differences in social investment, motivations for prosocial behavior, meta-ethics, and cognitive styles. We conclude with an explanation of the areas of moral overlap between theists and nontheists.

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Groupishness and religious sociality

Following Durkheim, many contemporary psychologists hold that effectively binding individuals into tight-knit communities is one of the key reasons for the cultural success and pervasiveness of world religions (e.g., [1,2]). Many aspects of religions – such as their emphasis on credibility-enhancing displays of commitment – serve to create an ideologically aligned and cohesive ingroup [2]. One consequence of this social connectedness is that, due to their tendency to have more social relationships and support, theists are generally happier than nontheists [1]. However, this tighter social connection may also lead to more parochial moral attitudes – selectively favoring the ingroup and actively derogating the outgroup. It is well established, for instance, that theists exhibit higher levels of social discrimination (e.g., [3]). Recently, religious-priming techniques established causal direction: being subliminally exposed to religious words or simply being in the presence of a church causes believers to report colder attitudes toward marginalized groups, including atheists, ethnic minorities, and homosexuals [4]. Similarly, simply asking Israeli Jews about their religious attendance enhanced admiration for a Jewish terrorist who killed Palestinian Muslims (although, notably, asking about prayer frequency did not produce the same results) [5].

These anti-outgroup findings are consistent with theists' higher levels of ingroup support. Believers tend to be more charitable and prosocial; however, much of this altruism is directed toward the religious ingroup [6]. Although superficially paradoxical, theists' ingroup generosity and outgroup derogation actually represent two sides of the same coin; the coalitional nature of religion is a powerful fuel for ingroup sociality, exploiting and exaggerating an evolved human tendency for parochialism. Nontheists also possess this tendency, of course, but they are less likely to find themselves in groups as cohesive or as entrenched in explicit moralizing as those based on religion.

Prosocial motives

Religious groups exert strong pressure on group members to conform to the requirements and moral ideals of the community [1,2]. Although the drive to appear virtuous to others is all but universal, it is especially pronounced among theists. An extensive meta-analysis found theists scoring consistently higher than nontheists on measures of socially desirable responding [7].

The belief in a watchful, morally judgmental supernatural agent supplements the social scrutiny that believers

experience within their communities. Extensive religious-priming research reveals that supernatural monitoring functions similarly to social monitoring, promoting public self-awareness and prosocial behavior [7]. Reverence for an omniscient, punitive god thus provides an additional, effective mechanism to ensure that theists' behavior corresponds to the values and demands of the group, especially in anonymous situations in which the lack of earthly observation might tempt selfish behavior [8]. Thus, belief in supernatural monitoring exploits theists' elevated reputational concerns to discourage selfish behavior that might disrupt the unity of the group.

A recent meta-analysis revealed that nontheists, by contrast, are generally unaffected by invocations of supernatural agents; compared with baseline, nontheists tend to be no more prosocial when primed with god concepts (A.F. Shariff *et al.*, unpublished). Nontheists do, however, show increases in prosocial behavior when primed with concepts relating to secular institutions, such as courts and the police [8]. The increased presence and effectiveness of these institutions has to some degree mitigated the necessity of supernatural monitoring, especially in countries where governments are strong and corruption is low. Perhaps not coincidentally, religion and anti-atheist distrust tend to be less prevalent in areas with strong and efficient secular institutions for monitoring behavior and enforcing norms. Reminding theists of the presence of effective secular institutions – and thus the implication that religion is not the only guarantor of ethical behavior – reduces the degree to which atheists are viewed with distrust [9].

Cognitive styles and meta-ethics

For believers, God is not just the ultimate arbiter of justice, but the author of morality itself. This meta-ethical belief provides theists with a unique foundation for thinking about moral issues, distinct from their nonreligious counterparts [10]. Recent research suggests that theists are moral objectivists; that is, they tend to believe that when two people disagree about a moral issue, only one person can be correct. By contrast, nontheists are more inclined than theists to view morality as subjective or culturally relative. Critically, however, this difference is more pronounced with regard to moral issues that have little to do with harm or injustice (e.g., sexual conduct).

This divergence in meta-ethics may underlie other moral differences between theists and nontheists. According to utilitarian morality, the violation of a moral rule (e.g., 'don't lie') is permissible, or even obligatory, under conditions in which the transgression would optimize welfare for the greatest number of people. Recent research suggests that, across a number of moral domains, theists are less willing than nontheists to base judgments on such utilitarian thinking [10,11] (Figure 1).

One possible explanation for this finding is that believers are less analytical than nonbelievers and thus are less likely to engage in a careful, utilitarian analysis of the situation [12]. Given the demonstrated connection between intuitive, 'System 1' thinking and deontological decision making, this is a compelling possibility (see Box 1 for this and other open questions). One recent and potentially

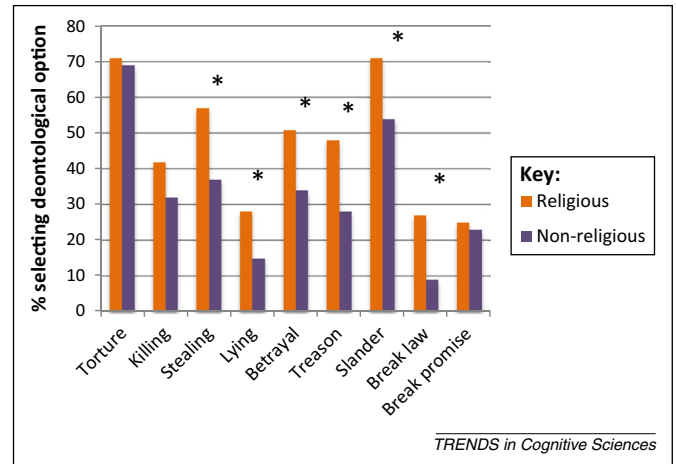


Figure 1. Religious individuals are more likely than nonreligious individuals to adopt a deontological – rather than utilitarian – stance toward various transgressions ($p < 0.007$), with the exception of torture, killing, and breaking promises ($p > 0.176$). Participants chose whether each action is: (i) never permissible to perform (deontological stance); (ii) permissible to perform if more good than bad results (weak utilitarian stance); or (iii) obligatory to perform if more good than bad results (strong utilitarian stance). Data adapted, with permission, from [11].

inconsistent finding showed that religious individuals are slower than nontheists when resolving dilemmas between deontological and utilitarian choices [13]. This may indicate that religious individuals are engaging in more reflective thinking than are nontheists. Alternatively, however, if theists view rule violations as disobedience to God, their slower response time could be the product of an attempt to resolve the cognitive conflict between two (occasionally) opposing moral principles – utilitarian benefits and a deontological obedience to God's moral authority.

Finally, religious individuals appear to moralize a wider range of actions beyond those pertaining to harm and injustice, including disobedience of authority, disloyalty to one's ingroup, and sexual impurity [1,10]. At the individual level, theists' broad morality may simply be the

Box 1. Unresolved questions and hypotheses for future research

(i) Is social affiliation and reputation management a stronger moral motive for theists?

The more intense groupishness of theists may lead them to be more motivated than nontheists to maintain moral standing in the eyes of their community, in terms of both moral behavior and moralizing (which may be used as a tool to signal group affiliation). These differences should be exacerbated in nonanonymous situations and in larger and more densely connected ingroups.

(ii) Is universal humanity a stronger moral motive for nontheists?

If nontheists take a more universalist perspective than theists, framing charitable giving in terms of the benefits to humanity should be a stronger motive for nontheists.

(iii) Are nontheists more analytical in their moral decision-making?

If cognitive style differences are responsible for nontheists being more utilitarian, being under cognitive load or time pressure should make nontheists as deontological as theists.

(iv) Under what conditions will theists and nontheists agree?

Theists and nontheists should agree in their moral outrage when a target is (a) perceived to have moral standing and (b) the victim of unwarranted harm or injustice (i.e., their interests are selfishly violated).

product of theists' belief in and adherence to moral rules espoused by their religion. For example, the moralization of purity may be due to theists' greater sacralization of the human body and how it is used. However, these moralizing differences may also reflect fundamental differences in emotional temperaments. Theists' greater moral concern about purity may be due to theists' greater sensitivity to disgust and/or greater reliance on such emotions when making moral judgments. At the group level, theists' broad morality may reflect both the use of moralization as a marker of group affiliation and submission to rules – such as obedience and loyalty – that sustain group cohesion and success.

A common humanity

Although theists and nontheists disagree whether obedience to authority or sexual impurity are morally relevant concepts, there is much greater consensus about moral issues involving harm and injustice. For example, both religious and nonreligious individuals take a predominantly deontological stance toward torture (Figure 1) and both groups find acts of unjust harm (e.g., killing an innocent for no good reason) to be objectively wrong. All world religions defend some version of the Golden Rule, a doctrine that reflects evolved inclinations toward fairness and reciprocity. Recent studies suggest that individuals, independent of religion, exhibit an impulse to behave cooperatively and that they manage to override this immediate prosocial impulse only on further reflection [14]. This universal preference toward prosociality is apparent even in infancy. Thus, although theists and nontheists may be divided through differences in sociality, earthly and supernatural reputational concerns, and meta-ethics, the two groups are united in what could be considered 'core' intuitive preferences for justice and compassion. Although the two groups may sometimes disagree about which groups or individuals

deserve justice or their compassion, these core moral intuitions form the best basis for mutual understanding and intergroup conciliation.

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Cognitive-load approaches to detect deception: searching for cognitive mechanisms

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A current focus in deception research is on developing cognitive-load approaches (CLAs) to detect deception. The aim is to improve lie detection with evidence-based and ecologically valid procedures. Although these approaches show great potential, research on cognitive processes or mechanisms explaining how they operate

is lacking. Potential mechanisms underlying the most popular techniques advocated for field application are highlighted. Cognitive scientists are encouraged to conduct basic research that qualifies the 'cognitive' in these new approaches.

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Introduction

Decades of deception research have shown that humans are not much better than chance at detecting deception. In two