This commentary has been accepted for publication in Behavioral and Brain Sciences. The target article is “Moral disciplining; The cognitive and evolutionary foundations of puritanical morality” by Léo Fitouchi, Jean-Baptiste André, and Nicolas Baumard. The article can be read here: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/behavioral-and-brain-sciences/article/abs/moral-disciplining-the-cognitive-and-evolutionary-foundations-of-puritanical-morality/EE9FF9527C01FD1E42BBB4896872F1B4

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Puritanism as moral advertisement helps solve the puzzle of ineffective moralization

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Abstract

The Moral Discipline Theory proposes that people moralize excessive innocent behavior to discipline others to behave in ways that facilitate cooperation. However, such disciplining might not always be effective. To solve this puzzle of ineffective moralization we should think of puritanism in terms of moral advertisement aimed at reputation management rather than the manipulation of others.

Main text

The Moral Disciplining Theory provides an excitingly novel and interesting solution to the puzzle of puritanical morality. Fitouchi et al. (2022) argue that people intuitively interpret pleasurable and innocent behavior such as dancing and drinking as suggestive of a lack of self-control. Such control is needed to give up one’s short-term strategies in favor of the long-term strategy of cooperation. By moralizing innocent pleasurable behavior, people thus aim to discipline others to behave in ways that facilitate cooperation.

The idea that puritanism builds on an association between pleasurable and innocent behavior and lack of self-control is quite convincing. The authors, however, argue that puritanical moralization does not have to be effective in disciplining people’s behavior; it only must be perceived as such. But if such moralization is not effective, then this raises the puzzle of why people do it in the first place. How could
this facilitate cooperation? The key to solving this puzzle of ineffective moralization lies in reputation-based cooperation and partner choice which also lies at the heart of the Moral Disciplining Theory. In a biological market it is important to build a reputation as a trustworthy individual because this raises the odds to be chosen as a cooperative partner (Barclay, 2013; Noë & Hammerstein, 1995). One can build such a reputation, for instance, by acting in cooperative ways. Good and bad deeds, however, are often obvious but abstaining from doing bad things is less so. It is easy to tell that a person steals by catching them in the act, but how do we establish that a person never steals?

When information about our cooperative intentions is ambiguous or unavailable to others, it pays off to advertise them by condemning behavior that indicates uncooperativeness. You condemn stealing so others can infer that you will never steal yourself. The strategy appears to be quite effective. People tend to treat moral condemnation as a reliable signal of the condemner’s trustworthiness or “moral goodness”, even more than when a person simply states that they behave morally (Jordan et al., 2017). We do so from a young age as seven to nine year old children believe that a person who condemns stealing is less likely to steal (Hok et al., 2020).

Under this view, the primary function of puritanical moralization then might not be to manipulate other people’s behavior but to manage one’s reputation. By condemning behavior that is suggestive of lack of self-control you communicate to others that you are a person who decries such behavior and hence are a self-controlled and reliable cooperator. This significantly raises your odds of being chosen as a partner in the biological market. Puritanical moralization can thus be effective as a self-advertising strategy even if it fails as a disciplining one.

We can expect such a reputational strategy to be especially effective and appealing in times of social disarray (which is the case as the authors show). Under such conditions it might be less clear who is reliable partner and the odds of being victimized raise significantly. Condemning behavior that indicates uncooperativeness then might function as a lighthouse guiding cooperative partners towards you. Conversely, you can rely on others’ condemnations as a guide to finding trustworthy people yourself.

Condemnation, however, only works as a reliable signal if condemners live up to their own condemnations. Otherwise, one is a hypocrite who deceives others into collaborating with an unreliable partner, reaping the benefits of the reputation boost without paying the costs. Therefore, hypocrites are looked upon more harshly than perpetrators who did not condemn the act they committed (Hok et al., 2020; Jordan et al., 2017). To avoid deception, people will check for cues of commitment. A good start for condemners to deliver such cues is to never behave in ways that they condemn. However, again, such information is ambiguous. A more straightforward sign of commitment, then, might be to discipline others for their excessive behavior. This clearly shows that you are so deeply concerned about the behavior that you are willing to pay a cost. Moral disciplining thus results from the reputational concerns that come with the commitment made by moral condemnation, which is itself a tool for reputation management. However, we can expect people to adjust their behavior in response to disciplining only if they intuit that doing so is their best option available, e.g., if not doing so is more costly or if conforming brings reputational benefits in the biological market. Thinking of puritanical morality in terms of moral advertisement thus solves the puzzle of ineffective moralization.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Thom Scott-Phillips for the helpful comments.

Competing interests: none
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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