

# Lecture 05 : Moral Psychology

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# 1. Moral Psychology Drives Environmental Concern

According to Feinberg & Willer (2013, p. 2), 'liberals express greater levels of environmental concern than do conservatives in part *because* liberals are more likely to view environmental issues in moral terms.' Is this true?

In this section we aim to understand and evaluate the fourth key claim in the argument that cultural differences in moral psychology matter for political conflict over climate change:

'we hypothesized that liberals express greater levels of environmental concern than do conservatives in part *because* liberals are more likely to view environmental issues in moral terms' (Feinberg & Willer 2013, p. 2; my emphasis).

The same claim is made in an influential review:

'The moral framing of climate change has typically focused on only the first two values: harm to present and future generations and the unfairness of the distribution of burdens caused by climate change. *As a result*, the justification for action on climate change holds less moral priority for conservatives than liberals' (Markowitz & Shariff 2012, p. 244; my emphasis).

Is this true?

Feinberg & Willer (2013) support this claim with two studies (numbered 1a and 1b in their paper). The first (1a) provides evidence that socially liberal, but perhaps not socially conservative, participants view a failure to recycle as a moral violation. The second (1b) provides evidence that the effect of political ideology (liberal vs conservative) is mediated by whether the participants regarded environmental issues as moral issues.

Does this work beyond the US? I found it difficult to identify many similar studies with non-US participants. We considered Doran et al. (2019) in *Do Ethical Attitudes Shape Political Behaviours?* in Lecture 04, which has participants from four European countries. In addition, Milfont et al. (2019) studied a group of participants from New Zealand. They find an interesting interaction between political identity and moral psychology. In a post-hoc analysis, they find that

'individuals with strong individualising morals evidenced a positive relationship between liberal ideology and electricity conservation [...], whereas individuals who reported weak individualising morals evidenced a negative relationship' (Milfont et al.

2019, p. 10).

While Milfont et al. (2019)'s results differ from Feinberg & Willer (2013)'s findings in interesting ways, their results do provide support for the main claim that concerns us: environmental concerns and behaviours are partly explained by moral foundations. This makes it plausible that environmental concern is, at least in part, driven by moral concerns and not entirely by political ideology.

## 2. Framing Changes Ethical Attitudes

Environmental rhetoric tends to emphasize harm and unfairness. Will introducing moral terms that appeal more to social conservatives than social liberals cause social conservatives to become more supportive of environmental action?

The fifth and final claim in our argument that differences in moral psychology explain political conflict concerns moral reframing. If environmental arguments are reframed in terms of moral concerns which are likely to be more highly weighted by conservatives than liberals, will conservatives show more support for measures to mitigate climate change?

Feinberg & Willer (2013, Study 3) provide evidence that they will. They created two op-ed style pieces which differed only in that one framed environmental issues in terms of harm whereas the other framed them in terms of purity. Participants were divided into two groups. Each group read one of the op-ed style pieces, then answered a survey about proenvironmental attitudes, a survey about proenvironmental legislation and a survey about knowledge of anthropogenic climate change. Conservatives scored significantly higher on all three measures after reading the op-ed style piece which framed things in terms of purity.

### 2.1. Two Extensions

Can moral reframing change how people act?

Kidwell et al. (2013) found that it can. They studied how much people put into their recycling bins after they received a leaflet about recycling which was framed either in terms of harm or else in terms of in-group loyalty and respect for authority. They report:

‘we developed tailored persuasive messages that appealed to the individualizing foundations for liberals, based on fairness and avoiding harm to others, and the binding foundation for conservatives, based on duty and an obligation to adhere to authority.

We found that these congruent appeals significantly affected consumers' acquisition, usage, and recycling intentions and behaviors' (Kidwell et al. 2013).

Further, Wolsko et al. (2016, Experiment 2) found evidence that moral reframing can influence how much people donate to an 'Environmental Defense Fund'.

Can liberals' attitudes on typically conservative issues also be changed using a similar ethical framing strategy?

Feinberg & Willer (2015) looked at a typically conservative issue in the US, making English the official language of the United States. They found that liberals' support for this issue could be increased by moral reframing; in this case, by reframing it in terms of fairness.

For more on moral reframing, see Feinberg et al. (2019)'s review.

## 2.2. Aside: Why isn't moral reframing more widely used?

Feinberg & Willer (2015) asked conservatives to write arguments that would persuade liberals, and conversely. Participants were told they would be 'entered into a draw for a \$50 bonus' if their arguments proved effective.

Fewer than 10% of the arguments provided actually fitted with the target morality. Most fitted with the authors' morality.

Around a third of liberals even wrote arguments attacking conservative morality.

Why are people so bad at moral reframing?

'Without recognizing that one's political rivals possess different morals, and without a clear understanding of what those different morals are, using moral reframing becomes impossible' (Feinberg & Willer 2019, p. 7).

Another (compatible) possibility is intolerance. People are less tolerant of differences in moral than in nonmoral attitudes (Skitka et al. 2005). Perhaps this makes them unwilling to provide arguments that are effective across differences in moral psychology.

## 2.3. Never Trust a Psychologist

I am a fan of Feinberg and Willer but they are sometimes unreliable. Consider:

‘individuals experience their moral convictions as objective truths about the world (Skitka et al., 2005). As a result, it can be difficult to recognize that there are different “truths” that other people believe in (Ditto & Koleva, 2011; Kovacheff et al., 2018). Indeed, polling data indicates that people are apt to perceive someone who does not endorse their morality as simply immoral or evil, rather than morally different (Doherty & Kiley, 2016)’ (Feinberg & Willer 2019, p. 7).

When I read this, I expected to find that the sources they cite provide support for the claims they make. But which of the sources cited do support the claims they make?

Not one:

- Skitka et al., 2005 mentions the claim about objectivity but does not provide evidence for it. Those authors cite Shweder (2002) footnote I’m not including these works in the list of references to avoiding giving the impression that they are relevant to this topic. in support of it, which is a brief opinion piece in a magazine. Skitka et al., 2005 is indirectly relevant because it is about people being less tolerant of differences in moral than in nonmoral attitudes.
- Ditto & Koleva, 2011<sup>1</sup> is a two-page unargued endorsement of Moral Foundations Theory.
- Kovacheff et al., 2018<sup>2</sup> is an interesting review but I couldn’t find anything directly relevant to the claim it is cited in support of. (It’s very long so I may have missed something.)
- Doherty & Kiley, 2016<sup>3</sup> does not support the point about ‘polling data’ at all. This is a reference to a blog post (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/22/key-facts-partisanship/>) which is about about political parties, not ‘endorsing their morality’. (To make this relevant, you would need a strong premise linking moral psychology and political identity.)

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<sup>1</sup> I’m not including these works in the list of references to avoiding giving the impression that they are relevant to this topic.

<sup>2</sup> I’m not including these works in the list of references to avoiding giving the impression that they are relevant to this topic.

<sup>3</sup> I’m not including these works in the list of references to avoiding giving the impression that they are relevant to this topic.

Not all of the sources they cite are even directly relevant to the points they are cited in support of.

My conclusion: Claims made by leading experts in peer-reviewed journals are sometimes unsupported even when citations give the impression that they are based on a rich body of evidence.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. The Argument and Some Objections

Feinberg & Willer (2013)'s brilliant argument for the influence of cultural differences in moral psychology on political conflict over climate change faces some compelling theoretical and empirical objections. If the objections are right, they leave us with a puzzle. Given that the evidence for cultural variation in moral psychology is at best weak, and given that the theoretical argument for moral reframing is flawed, why does moral reframing seem to work?

We have explored Feinberg & Willer's argument that cultural differences in moral psychology explain political conflict on climate change.

I broke this into five considerations:

1. 'Moral convictions and the emotions they evoke shape political attitudes' (see *Do Ethical Attitudes Shape Political Behaviours?* in Lecture 04)
2. Moral Foundations Theory is true (see *Moral Pluralism: Beyond Harm* in Lecture 04; *Moral Foundations Theory: An Approach to Cultural Variation* in Lecture 04; and *Operationalising Moral Foundations Theory* in Lecture 04)
3. 'liberals and conservatives possess different moral profiles' (see *Liberals vs Conservatives* in Lecture 04)
4. 'liberals express greater levels of environmental concern than do conservatives in part because liberals are more likely to view environmental issues in moral terms' (see *Moral Psychology Drives Environmental Concern* (section §1))
5. 'exposing conservatives to proenvironmental appeals based on moral concerns that uniquely resonate with them will lead them to view the environment in moral terms and be more supportive of proenvironmental efforts.' (see *Framing Changes Ethical Attitudes* (section §2))

At this point you should understand the argument. You should also under-

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<sup>4</sup> Imagine how much worse it is for claims made by your lecturer in these lecture notes.

stand how it aims to support the claim that cultural differences in moral psychology explain political conflict on climate change.

What is a philosopher doing here? On the face of it, the argument is simply a (brilliant) piece of social science. No philosopher needed.<sup>5</sup>

But the argument gives rise to a puzzle. To see the puzzle, first consider some objections.

### 3.1. Objection 1 (weak)

What does the Moral Foundations Questionnaire measure?

On the Social Intuitionist Model of Moral Judgement (which is a part of Moral Foundations Theory; see *Moral Foundations Theory: An Approach to Cultural Variation* in Lecture 04), unreflective ethical judgements are consequences of moral foundations plus cultural learning.

This gives us reason to think that your answers to the questions will reflect your culture.

If moral disengagement is real (see *Moral Disengagement: The Evidence* in Lecture 03) unreflective ethical judgements are in part consequences reasoning from known principles. (They may also be consequences of moral foundations and cultural learning.)

In this case, your answers may not reflect your culture.

More generally, objections to the Social Intuitionist Model of Moral Judgement are objections to the theoretical justification for supposing that the Moral Foundations Questionnaire can get at cultural differences in moral psychology.

This is an objection to the claim that we know the third of the five points above ('liberals and conservatives possess different moral profiles') to be true.

### 3.2. Objection 2

Another, complementary objection to the third of the five points above ('liberals and conservatives possess different moral profiles') concerns measurement invariance.

As we have already seen (in *Operationalising Moral Foundations Theory* in Lecture 04), attempts to demonstrate scalar invariance have all or mostly

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<sup>5</sup> This is too quick. Philosophers sometimes act as cheerleaders. Nothing wrong with that, unless you think philosophy is about deriving truths using reason alone. But if you think that, you were very badly informed when you decided to take this module (sorry).

failed; and Iurino & Saucier (2020) even fail to find support for the five-factor model, which casts doubt on whether the Moral Foundations Questionnaire meets requirements for internal validity.

We are therefore not justified in using the Moral Foundations Questionnaire to compare means across different groups. But this is exactly what the claim that ‘liberals and conservatives possess different moral profiles’ requires us to do.

(Note that this objection, like Objection 1, seeks to establish that we do not know Claim 3; it is not an argument that this claim is false.)

### 3.3. Objection 3: Joan-Lars-Joseph

The evidence on cultural variation says socially conservative participants tend to regard all five foundations as roughly equally morally relevant.

This does not generate the prediction that socially conservative participants will be more likely to view climate issues as ethical issues when linked on one foundation (e.g. purity) than when linked to another foundation (e.g. harm).

Contrast Feinberg & Willer (2019, p. 4):

‘Why does moral reframing work? The primary explanation is that morally reframed messages are influential because targets perceive a “match” between their moral convictions and the argument in favor of the other side’s policy position.’

The Joan-Lars-Joseph objection<sup>6</sup> is this: if we take the claims cultural differences in moral psychology to be true, framing environmental issues in terms of purity should not cause conservatives to perceive more or less of a “match” than framing environmental issues in terms of harm.

This is an objection to the theoretical argument for the fourth claim in the five points above (‘liberals express greater levels of environmental concern than do conservatives in part because liberals are more likely to view environmental issues in moral terms’).

Note that Objections 2 and 3 are complementary: #2 aims to show that we lack evidence that liberals and conservatives differ in their moral psychology; #3 assumes that we have such evidence and aims to show that it does not support the conclusion about moral framing.

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Joan, Lars and Joseph. (I think they each came up with a version of this objection independently.)



### 3.4. A Puzzle

Given that the evidence for cultural variation in moral psychology is at best weak (Objections 1 and 2), and given that the theoretical argument for moral reframing is flawed (Objection 3), why does moral reframing seem to work?

## 4. The Puzzle of Moral Foundations Theory

Given that the evidence for cultural variation in moral psychology is at best weak, and given that the theoretical argument for moral reframing is flawed, why does moral reframing seem to work? Some evidence suggests that it may work in part because moral reframing makes an argument appear to you to fit better with your moral psychology (Wolsko 2017). Perhaps another part of the answer is that moral reframing provides cues to the source of a message, and people are more influenced by sources they perceive as sharing their political identity (Fielding et al. 2020). And perhaps a further part of the answer is that moral reframing can modulate how fluently people with different political identities can parse a message, and people are more influenced by messages they can parse more fluently. But these speculations about how moral reframing works have yet to be tested directly, and are unlikely to be the whole story. The puzzle remains.

Why does moral reframing work?

According to Feinberg & Willer (2019, p. 4), the ‘primary explanation’ is that moral reframing of an argument influences how well the argument matches (their term) a person’s moral psychology.

But both the evidence and the theoretical basis for this view faces objections (as we saw in *The Argument and Some Objections* (section §3)). These objections do not imply that the ‘primary explanation’ is wrong, only that we do not know that it is true. This motivates considering alternative possibilities.

Relatedly, is it possible to explain why moral reframing succeeds without commitment to Moral Foundations Theory?

We will consider three candidate explanations: perceived match, source and fluency.<sup>7</sup>

### 4.1. Perceived Match

Wolsko (2017) provides evidence for the hypothesis that moral reframing works in part because it influences how well an the argument matches a

<sup>7</sup> Feinberg & Willer (2019, p. 4)’s own view is that, while matching is the most important, all three are relevant to explaining why moral reframing works.

person's moral psychology. Their approach does not rely directly on Moral Foundations Theory and neatly avoids the objections to Feinberg & Willer (2013)'s position considered earlier (see *The Argument and Some Objections* (section §3) for these objections).

Wolsko (2017, Experiment 1) directly measured how participants' perceived the match between their values and the values in the message:

'Immediately after reading the moral framing manipulation, participants [...] were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a 5-item measure of salient value similarity, including: "The message above contains values that are important to me," "The message above comes from someone who thinks in a similar way as me," and "I share similar values with those that are presented in the message above."' (Wolsko 2017, p. 287).

Like Feinberg & Willer (2013, Study 3), Wolsko (2017, Experiment 1) found that moral reframing caused an increase in conservatives' proenvironmental attitudes and a decrease in liberals'.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, this effect was mediated by the degree to which participants' perceived the match between their values and the values in the message. They conclude

'it is a perceived shift in the personal moral relevance of the message which increases the persuasiveness of these environmental appeals' (Wolsko 2017, p. 289).

One limit of this study is that it does not involve any manipulation of the source of the message and so cannot distinguish the degree to which a message is perceived to match participants' values from the degree to which participants identify with the source of the message.

## 4.2. Source

Perhaps moral reframing is effective in part because it provides cues to the source of a message, and people are more influenced by sources they perceive as sharing their political identity.

Hurst & Stern (2020) provide indirect support for this idea in a study on attitudes to reducing use of fossil fuels. They manipulated both the content and the source of a message. When the content matched emphasised all

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<sup>8</sup> These authors did not find that moral reframing could eliminate the contrast between groups on climate scepticism. ('The one prominent exception to the moral framing effects observed in the present experiments was on climate change skepticism in Experiment 2. While the common ingroup condition was effective in decreasing skepticism overall, attitudes remained strongly and consistently polarized across conditions' (Wolsko 2017, p. 293).)

five foundations to match socially conservative moral foundations but was identified as originating from a liberal source, it rarely made a difference to conservative participants' environmental attitudes.

Fielding et al. (2020) manipulated only the source of a message and measured the influence of reading the message on participants' support for carbon tax. They found a significant effect of message source. This is evidence that people are more influenced by sources they perceive as sharing their political identity. (Schuldt et al. (2017) provide further, less direct evidence along these lines.)

They offer a bold conjecture on the basis of these results:

'it is possible that the values framing in past studies worked because it provided conservatives with information about the source of the message: when messages aligned with conservative values, Republicans [conservatives] filled in the gaps and simply presumed that the message came from a Republican source' (Fielding et al. 2020, p. 196).

While we do not have evidence sufficient to accept it, this conjecture does underline the importance of distinguishing the effects of perceived match and source in explaining why moral reframing works.

### 4.3. Fluency

Kidwell et al. (2013) conjecture that moral reframing may work because it increases the fluency with which messages can be parsed.

Fluency is important for judgements in a range of domains, including familiarity (e.g. Whittlesea 1993; Scott & Dienes 2008), agency (e.g. Sidarus et al. 2017), and surprise (e.g. Reisenzein 2000). Most importantly for us, the perceived fluency with which you process a message can influence how likely you are to hold it true (e.g. Unkelbach 2007). This is thought to be why repeating a message can make people more likely to believe it.<sup>9</sup>

Kidwell et al.'s conjecture is therefore coherent. If framing a message in a way that fits a person's moral psychology can increase the fluency with which they process it, this could explain why moral reframing works.

### 4.4. ... and More?

We have seen that Perceived Match, Source and Fluency provide at least three candidate explanations for why moral reframing works. None rely directly

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<sup>9</sup> 'the truth effect is mediated by the metacognitive experience of processing fluency' (Dechêne et al. 2009, p. 238).

on Moral Foundations Theory, and each avoids the objections considered in *The Argument and Some Objections* (section §3).

The candidate explanations are not exclusive: perhaps moral reframing works by way of multiple distinct processes.

To my knowledge, we lack insufficient evidence to conclude that any the explanations we have considered is correct. Perhaps none of them are. And even if they are all correct, these candidate explanations need not be the whole story. Maybe other processes are also needed to explain the success of moral reframing.

## 5. Conclusion: Moral Psychology Works

Because moral reframing works, we know that cultural differences in moral psychology are likely to matter for overcoming political conflict. Because the leading theoretical explanation of why moral reframing works faces some interesting objections, we do not yet understand why differences in moral psychology matter.

Do cultural differences in moral psychology explain political conflict on climate change?

We have explored Feinberg & Willer's argument that cultural differences in moral psychology explain political conflict on climate change. (See *The Argument and Some Objections* (section §3) for a summary linking each the claim to the section which covered it.)

This argument, if it works, would support a positive answer to our question. Not only do cultural differences in moral psychology explain political conflict on climate change: such conflict can be overcome by moral reframing.<sup>10</sup>

Not all of the claims are well supported. In particular, the third claim—'liberals and conservatives possess different moral profiles'—is not supported by evidence from Moral Foundations Theory (see *Operationalising Moral Foundations Theory* in Lecture 04); and the theoretical justification for predictions about moral reframing appears flawed (see *The Argument and Some Objections* (section §3)).

This leaves us with a puzzle. Why does moral reframing seem to work? (See *The Puzzle of Moral Foundations Theory* (section §4).)

<sup>10</sup> This is one reason why Pogge (2005) on responsibility for global poverty is so interesting. He is attempting to argue in a way that includes only premises even libertarians would accept. Their moral psychology may differ from both liberals' and conservatives' (Iyer et al. 2012). Pogge is not doing this himself (as far as I know), but perhaps his arguments lend themselves to moral reframing.

## 6. Question Session 05

These are the recordings of the live online whole-class question session. They are usually available on the day after the session. (You may need to refresh this page to make them appear.)

### 6.1. What Is Moral Conviction: Louis' Question

I formulated this week's essay question in terms of moral conviction because that's how my key source, Feinberg & Willer (2013), phrase it. But what is moral conviction?<sup>11</sup>

An influential source says:

'Moral conviction refers to a strong and absolute belief that something is right or wrong, moral or immoral' (Skitka et al. 2005, p. 896).

These authors have an extensive discussion in the introduction of their paper. However, consider how they operationalise moral conviction:

'Moral conviction was assessed with a single-item measure, specifically, "How much are your feelings about \_\_\_\_\_ connected to your core moral beliefs or convictions?" (Skitka et al. 2005, p. 899).

They are inviting their participants to bring their own understanding of moral conviction.

### 6.2. Reading: Sziszi's Find

There's a special issue of the journal *Social Cognition* that looks relevant and has some great authors (haven't read it myself yet):

<https://guilfordjournals.com/toc/soco/39/1>

## Glossary

**moral conviction** 'Moral conviction refers to a strong and absolute belief that something is right or wrong, moral or immoral' (Skitka et al. 2005, p. 896). 5, 6, 13

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<sup>11</sup> I added the glossary entry after Louis' question.

**moral disengagement** Moral disengagement occurs when self-sanctions are disengaged from inhumane conduct. Bandura (2002, p. 103) identifies several mechanisms of moral disengagement: ‘The disengagement may centre on redefining harmful conduct as honourable by moral justification, exonerating social comparison and sanitising language. It may focus on agency of action so that perpetrators can minimise their role in causing harm by diffusion and displacement of responsibility. It may involve minimising or distorting the harm that follows from detrimental actions; and the disengagement may include dehumanising and blaming the victims of the maltreatment.’ 7

**Moral Foundations Theory** The theory that moral pluralism is true; moral foundations are innate but also subject to cultural learning, and the Social Intuitionist Model of Moral Judgement is correct (Graham et al. 2019). Proponents often claim, further, that cultural variation in how these innate foundations are woven into ethical abilities can be measured using the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al. 2009; Graham et al. 2011). Some empirical objections have been offered (Davis et al. 2016; Davis et al. 2017; Doğruyol et al. 2019). See ??, 5–7, 9, 10, 12

**moral reframing** ‘A technique in which a position an individual would not normally support is framed in a way that it is consistent with that individual’s moral values. [...] In the political arena, moral reframing involves arguing in favor of a political position that members of a political group would not normally support in terms of moral concerns that the members strongly ascribe to’ (Feinberg & Willer 2019, pp. 2–3). 3, 4, 9–12

**Social Intuitionist Model of Moral Judgement** A model on which intuitive processes are directly responsible for moral judgements (Haidt & Bjorklund 2008). One’s own reasoning does not typically affect one’s own moral judgements, but (outside philosophy, perhaps) is typically used only to provide post-hoc justification after moral judgements are made. Reasoning does affect others’ moral intuitions, and so provides a mechanism for cultural learning. 7, 14

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