

Dehumanization, demonization, and morality shifting: Paths to moral certainty in  
extremist violence

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## Abstract

While evidence suggests that humans have an aversion to directly killing other humans, the phenomenon of extremist violence seems to speak against this. We review evidence in social psychological research for three ways in which people can subjectively overcome moral doubts, justifying past violence and facilitating future violence, on behalf of themselves or their social group. The victims can be *dehumanized*, either in the sense that they are like animals, or in the sense that they are inanimate. Victims can also be *demonized* as agents of evil that not only may, but must, be sought out and eliminated. Finally, in the light of recent theories of morality, perpetrators of violence can perform *morality shifting* – justifying their acts as fulfilling a positive moral duty to protect the ingroup and obey authority. Because perpetrators of violence believe they are acting morally, special care must be taken to distinguish their moralized justifications from genuine, evenhanded applications of morality. We argue that violent extremists and their supporters turn a deaf ear to moral pleas because they already believe themselves to be justified. Perhaps, then, the replacement of moralization by a more pragmatic approach offers the best hope for conflicts characterized by extremism.

Dehumanization, demonization, and morality shifting: Paths to moral certainty in violence

Extremism can be characterized as putting a political, social or religious goal ahead of most other considerations. As long as the few considerations that override the goal include respect for the life and rights of others, extremism is not a problem for society. The main problem of extremism is therefore the way in which it overcomes social, moral and human sanctions against violence. We will argue here that extremists commit violence because other moral concerns take priority for them, and because their victims are psychologically removed from moral consideration. These reasons are attractive, especially to people facing uncertainty about their own acts and about their situation in general, because they deliver the certainty that follows from believing that one is morally right. More disturbingly, even people who believe themselves to be behaving morally risk mirroring the logic and actions of extremists.

Thomas Hobbes (1651/1973) promoted a view of human nature that is still around today – a disbelief in the existence of innate human moral intuitions. He argued that humans naturally harm others if it will help reach their goals. It is thus the duty of a peaceful social arrangement to overcome human nature. Rousseau (1754/2010) challenged Hobbes' assumptions, in the *Discourse on Inequality*: "There is another principle which has escaped Hobbes ... an innate repugnance at seeing a fellow-creature suffer." Rousseau admits that human nature includes violence, but sees this violence as passionate, not wicked, and tempered by compassion. Rousseau blames large-scale, malicious violence on the alienation and accumulation to be found in large social structures.

Although today there is still debate whether violence is innate, the bulk of evidence paints our species with a dual nature. Recent research on moral decision-making, for instance, shows two sides to humanity: willing to kill in the abstract, but inhibited from personally carrying out violence. In a hypothetical situation studied by Joshua Greene and colleagues, the participant has to decide whether to push one person in front of a train in order to save many others. When the mind is occupied with a distraction, the decision to kill becomes harder to support (Greene et al., 2008). Neuroimaging and lesion studies, too, show that the aversion to killing depends on the more emotional parts of the brain (Greene et al., 2004; Greene, 2007). Our instincts, then, oppose direct responsibility for one murder even if it would avert five deaths.

The extremist, then, should act under a cloud of uncertainty. Murdering one person, even when thought to save many more lives, *should* lead to uncertainty. In fact, studies implicate the brain's conflict resolution systems (e.g., anterior cingulate cortex) in situations where a horrible deed must be done to prevent a worse outcome (Greene et al., 2004). Yet certainty and extremism seem to be inextricably tied together (see Hogg, 2007, for a brief review; Swann et al, 2009; McGregor, Haji, Nash, & Teper, 2008). How, then, do violent extremists and their supporters overcome the aversion to killing, and quiet the uncertainty that should follow complicity in murder?

Perhaps extremists have no empathy to be overcome, like abnormal sociopaths who kill without remorse. The evidence does not support this view (Atran, 2004; Silke, 1998; Ruby, 2002). Extremists do not do what they do because they began as abnormal individuals, although their empathy may be curtailed by the demands of ideology and identity (Castano, in press). In fact, many of the beliefs of violent extremist organizations are shared by the population from which they arise (Saucier et

al., 2009). Whether driven by mindless conformity or vividly believed social identity and ideology (S. A. Haslam & Reicher, 2008), the motives of terrorists are widely shared among the rest of their group; only their means and acts are exceptional (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006).

We discuss here three ways in which moral uncertainty surrounding violent acts can be reduced, encouraging direct and indirect support for violence, before and after the fact. Although inspired by Bandura's theory of moral disengagement (1999), we focus here on the contexts involved in extremist violence. We also want to clarify the term "moral disengagement." Although this term implies removal of moral concern, we see a more frightening potential in the positive *moralization* of violence.

Specifically, violent extremism can be reconciled with the moral sense:

1. by dehumanizing or depersonalizing victims: removing them from moral consideration
2. by demonizing victims into moral villains: both removing them from moral consideration, and making it a moral duty to punish them.
3. by morality shifting: moving the focus of moral judgment from harm and fairness, to moral concerns favoring the ingroup.

#### *Dehumanization Removal of Moral Concern*

The philosopher Peter Singer has developed the concept of the *moral circle* (Singer, 1981). In moral dilemmas, humans tend to treat similar beings with more moral concern than dissimilar beings: preferring kin over non-kin, group members over non-group members, and conspecifics over other species. Over history, the radius of this circle of concern has increased, including all of humanity and even non-

human animals. However, in practice the moral circle is smaller than in theory; in competition between nations, for example, the lives of innocent members of the enemy group are valued less than the lives of fellow nationals (Pratto & Glasford, 2008). In fact, the more identified a person is with a social group, the narrower his or her circle of moral concern for other groups (Reed & Aquino, 2003).

For the extremist whose ideology demands violent action and not just discrimination, the victims need to be far indeed from the center of the moral circle. For this purpose, the strongest metaphor would deny them the moral concern due to members of the human species. This can be done either by equating the victim's group to non-human animals, or to unfeeling objects.

*From human to animal.* In our existentially fuelled effort to differentiate ourselves from animals (Goldenberg et al., 2001) we most likely exaggerate what separates us from lizards, lions and chimps. Whether or not we are actually the only species to possess traits such as self-awareness, is less important, here, than whether we think some traits are uniquely human. From the selective attribution of these traits, we can infer how much people recognize others as human.

Leyens, Paladino and their colleagues (2000) used this logic in proposing the theory of emotional infrahumanization. Certain types of emotions are seen to be felt equally by animals and humans alike, while others can only be experienced by humans. The former are called primary emotions (e. g., pleasure, fear, anger), while the latter are secondary emotions (e.g. hope, shame, nostalgia). People allow that out-group members can experience primary emotions, but when it comes to secondary emotions, they are not so sure. "We love but they 'love,' we grieve but they 'grieve,'" writes philosopher Raymond Gaita (2000). The inner life of people belonging to a different group is seen as lacking the same depth that characterizes our own. A host of

studies in a variety of countries show that outgroups are seen as less able to experience secondary emotions, compared to ingroups (Demoulin, Pozo, & Leyens, 2009). Moreover, secondary emotions are less associated with outgroups than they are with ingroups, as shown by studies using a process-dissociation procedure (Gaunt, Leyens, & Demoulin, 2002) or the implicit association task (Paladino et al., 2002).

This background of bias can support action against a group. Pereira, Vala and Leyens (2009) manipulated information about whether Turkish people were capable of feeling secondary emotions, and found that such infrahumanization reduced support for Turkish accession to the European Union. Cuddy, Rock, and Norton (2007) likewise found that the less an other-race victim of Hurricane Katrina was seen as feeling secondary emotions, the less willingness to help them; this effect was not found for primary emotions. Also in the context of a hurricane, this time an imaginary one, DeLuca-McLean and Castano (2009) found that greater infra-humanization of an ethnic minority victim (but only among conservatives, not liberals) was related to preference for a behavioural modification program, versus the more uniquely human psychotherapy, in treating the victim's psychological suffering.

Research also suggests that infra-humanization is used to mitigate the moral consequences of ingroup responsibility for violence. Castano and Giner-Sorolla (2006) report three studies in which participants were given scenarios, fictitious or historical, in which their own group was responsible for mass slaughter of another group (fictional aliens, Native Americans or Australian Aborigines), as opposed to just reading about such mass deaths. Participants infrahumanized the victim groups more when their own group was responsible, implying a motivation to reduce the moral impact of this responsibility by excluding the victims from the human sphere of moral concern. Similar results have been reported by Cehajic, Brown and Gonzalez

(2009, Study 1) among modern-day Chileans in the context of historical violence against the Mapuche people.

*From human to object.* While denying others uniquely human emotions makes them more like animals, denying them emotionality altogether equates them to robots. In a recent review, N. Haslam (2006) proposes that others are dehumanized in two main ways: animalistic and mechanistic. Animalistic dehumanization occurs when others are perceived as lacking culture, refinement, morality and rationality. Often, colonizers' perception of an indigenous population was characterized by this kind of dehumanization, which still characterizes stereotypical perceptions of, for example, African Americans in the United States and Northern African immigrants in Europe.

Coldness, rigidity and passivity, by contrast, are the features of mechanistic dehumanization. The targets of this kind of dehumanization are not perceived as animals to be managed and punished, but as robots, who carry out their programmed mission, heartlessly but efficiently. Nazi officers in Hollywood's movies, or Drago, the Russian nemesis of Sylvester Stallone's Rocky in the fourth film of that series, exemplify this image of the enemy. Stallone, the American hero, is by contrast full of emotions: "Adrian!" he screams to his wife after his win, in a manner that betrays his pure human nature.

As noted by Haslam (2006), mechanistic dehumanization can be found in medicine, in which the patient is reduced to an organic subject, and, more broadly, in postmodern societies characterized by high reliance on technology (Montague & Matson, 1983). Animalistic dehumanization, on the contrary, is more characteristic of dehumanization in intergroup relations. But while the traits of an animal may contradict the traits of a robot, they can easily coexist as images of the same target. In rhetoric leading to violent action against others, it is not uncommon to witness

accusations both that the other is a cold, emotionless clone and an irrational, hyper-aroused animal, as happens in the portraying of the Islamic terrorist. These two dehumanizing strategies, may, however, lead to violent action toward the target in different ways. While animalistic dehumanization brings up the need to crush and get rid of an emotionally aversive element, mechanistic dehumanization sanitizes violence against the target by emptying it completely of emotionality: we are not slaying an animal, but rather, pulling the plug of an inanimate object. In fact, sometimes denying the other group the ability to feel any emotion may motivate excusing one's own collective abuses against them, as much as denying them the ability to feel human emotions does (Leidner, Castano, Zaiser & Giner-Sorolla, in press).

### *Demonization: Moralized Violence*

There is another way to square high moral standards with participation in murder. In *demonization*, victims are removed from moral consideration by painting them as not as robots or animals, but as malefactors, deserving punishment and death. While punitive ideas have been mentioned as part of dehumanization in conflicts (Bar-Tal, 1990; Oren & Bar-Tal, 2007), we believe that demonization goes beyond simple denial of humanity to an inferior group. If people are seen as non-human, they may freely be destroyed if they block a group's material interests – as in colonialism. They may be contemptuously excluded from participation in society. But there is no mandate to risk life and limb and spend precious resources just to seek out and destroy

mere non-humans. Only painting the enemy as malignant and incapable of reform can justify mounting a crusade against them, even at great expense and with few material benefits.

In this way, demonization both excludes the victim from moral consideration and creates a special kind of *moral mandate*: an attitude grounded in a moral conviction (Skitka & Mullen, 2002). Usually, people need no evidence that their convictions are right or wrong; they just “know”, as the social intuitionist model of moral decision-making suggests (cf. Haidt, 2001). Moral mandates are central in belief systems, making them very important and usually extreme, and held with high certainty – an important feature, if moralized attitudes are seen as a cure for uncertainty. Unlike other strong attitudes, however, moral mandates strongly motivate their owner to act on them, particularly when people feel threatened or need to show that they are moral beings (Skitka, 2002). Moral mandates also lead to greater apparent social and physical distance from dissimilar others; intolerance towards them; and less good will and motivation to resolve conflicts (Wright, Cullum, & Schwab, 2008; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005).

Demonization is a special kind of moral mandate that identifies an out-group as evil, and justifies any measures taken against them, including violence. Naturally, demonized foes may be seen to threaten one’s own people, justifying aggression as retaliation (see Reicher, A. Haslam, & Rath, 2008). But the potentially disinterested nature of moral emotions (Haidt, 2003) means that even enemies who threaten other people can be crusaded against, altruistically. The ideal punishment of demons knows no restrictions, either practical or moral, and in fact is a positive moral good.

Who can be demonized? As an example that may give insight into the extremist mindset, we can point to criminals. Strict law-and-order attitudes exist in almost any

society, but have been given full political expression in the United States over the past twenty years. States have enacted rigid sentencing laws, mandating long sentences for repeated minor offenses. Overcrowding, violence, social isolation and rape in prisons are tolerated, even celebrated, as part of the punishment process. Humiliating, unusual punishments have also emerged; Ted Poe, a state district judge in Texas made criminals on probation wear signs in public describing their offenses, and even clean dung from the police stables (Karp, 1998).

Political entities can also be demonized, often by the same people who demonize criminals; a survey of United States public opinion has shown support for violent international action (the two Iraq wars) to be predicted by support for harsh criminal punishments (the death penalty), even controlling for ideology and racism (Lieberman, 2006). The Iranian epithet of the “Great Satan” aimed at the United States is mirrored by President George W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” label aimed at Iran and other states (Beeman, 2005). Nazi propaganda depicted Jews as not just contemptible subhumans, but as active agents of harm (Burrin, 1999/2003). Ironically, the Nazi label has itself become an easy way to demonize opponents. The satirical “Godwin’s Law” – with some kernel of truth – asserts that any topic discussed on the Internet will end with heated analogies to Hitler, overwhelming useful dialogue. The Nazi label, applied to conservatives by radicals in the 1960’s, was returned with interest by the conservative writer Jonah Goldberg in his book on “Liberal Fascism” (2008) and by right-wing protesters who portray President Obama in Nazi uniform. In this climate the “Nazi card” can be played even against Israel, despite protestations that such analogies go categorically out of bounds (Iganski & Sweiry, 2009).

Another aspect of demonization that goes beyond retribution is its collective nature, applying to a group. This allows the most extreme acts, not the most typical, to

stand as representative of the whole, justifying vicarious retribution against individual group members (Lickel, Miller, et al., 2006). Thus, harsh prison conditions are justified by raising the specter of “coddling” murderers and rapists, ignoring the majority of non-violent offenders in prison. Some jihadist scholars argued, in justification of the September 11 attacks, that the citizens of a democracy may fairly be punished and killed for the crimes of their government because they are assumed to support it (Wictorowitz & Kaltner, 2003). Even distinct groups can be skewered together on an axis of evil; against all evidence, a near majority of Americans has consistently thought Iraq aided Al-Qaida in the September 11 attacks, bolstering support for the 2003 war (Lieberman & Skitka, 2008).

If all that mattered were the utilitarian motive to punish an individual or group, demonization should lead to exactly judged retribution for a wrongdoing. But demonization goes beyond the concept of *lex talionis* or “an eye for an eye,” which is already powerful enough. In studies of public satisfaction with criminal punishment, retribution emerges as the most satisfying feature, eclipsing rehabilitation and confinement of offenders or compensation of victims (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002). However, demonization allows punishments disproportionate to the offense, at the rate of two eyes for an eye. One reason for this is that it categorizes the perpetrators as evil, rather than the act as unjust. Demonized people no longer attract moral concern. In fact, punishing them becomes a moral good; so any holding back on punishment is morally questionable. Procedural justice likewise is an unacceptable impediment to a war against demons, when distinguishing the culpable from the merely accused (Skitka & Houston, 2001). The moral nature of the crusade, which fuels an easily-gained sense of certainty, makes it more important to punish wrongdoers than care about the innocent.

*Morality Shifting: Violence Supporting Ingroup Morality*

*That is why threats to group identity and autonomy make the work of preparing terrorists, and soldiers, so much easier than indoctrination from a cold start. Indeed when the homeland is in peril people, especially young men, seek indoctrination into fighting units. (Salter, 2008, p. 75)*

So far, we have seen how supporters of violence can switch off their aversion to harm and concern for fairness through dehumanization of its victims; and, furthermore, how they can justify their harmful acts as acts of justice by demonizing the victims. Another psychological process by which past or anticipated violence can be morally mandated is *morality shifting* (Leidner & Castano, 2009). This process reduces moral uncertainty about violent acts by de-emphasizing the moral principles that condemn the harm and unfairness of violence, in favor of other moral principles, such as loyalty.

People's moral repertoire consists of several principles (Shweder, 1982; Turiel, 1983) whose relative importance can change across situations and time (Shaw, 1999). As research has recently shown, there are at least five principles people draw on when making moral judgments: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Harm/care morals require people not to harm anybody and to help each other, while fairness/reciprocity morals require people to treat others fairly. Ingroup/loyalty and authority/respect morals impose a duty to preferentially honor the well-being of one's own group members and leaders, and to conform to ingroup norms. Purity/sanctity morals require

people to eschew bodily passions and impure actions, giving priority to soul over body by following rules about the “pure” use of the body.

The two principles of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity are seen as a universal “intuitive morality” (Haidt & Graham, 2007) across societies (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969; Miller, 2006). Individuals from any cultural background who support violence that causes harm will seek to reduce or eliminate this threat to their moral identity, with all the accompanying uncertainty. This is especially true when the harm is to defenseless people, further threatening fairness and reciprocity. One can perhaps treat the violent actions as non-moral issues; strictly pragmatic acts. But because people are strongly motivated to be seen as positively moral by others and themselves, and evaluate their important ingroups primarily on the domain of morality (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007), this strategy has limitations.

Another strategy to counter the threat that violence poses to one’s moral identity, and to reduce uncertainty, is to apply other moral principles than harm/care and fairness/reciprocity to one’s violent actions. Principles such as ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity can allow violence and even demand it. If such a morality shift occurs, violent actions against the outgroup that are argued to help the ingroup can be judged as moral, instead of immoral. In this way, violent acts can be positively moralized and become moral mandates.

Generally, ingroup/loyalty and authority/respect morality are the foundations of our social identities. As such, they mandate helpful behavior toward fellow group members. As Wildschut et al. (2002) demonstrated in a prisoner’s dilemma game, however, individuals adhering to perceived ingroup norms also behave more competitively towards outgroups (see also Wildschut & Insko, 2006). Cohen, Montoya, and Insko (2006), found that loyalty to the ingroup, whether measured

across cultures or manipulated in an experiment, was related to increased value placed on conflict between ingroup and outgroups. Because the experiment's effect was found primarily among guilt-prone people, Cohen et al. (2006) see it as implicating ingroup morality in desire for conflict. However, these authors did not directly measure the ability of different moral codes to facilitate outgroup-directed violence.

In two studies, two of this paper's authors investigated morality shifting in the context of past ingroup-outgroup violence (Leidner & Castano, under review). In both studies, American participants were confronted with either U.S. (ingroup-committed violence) or Australian (outgroup-committed violence) soldiers torturing and killing Iraqi prisoners. After reading reports of the incidents, a measure of different moral principles was administered; either the Moral Foundations Questionnaire in study 1 (Haidt & Graham, 2007), or an implicit measure of the accessibility of the various principles (Study 2). As predicted, in Study 1 ingroup/loyalty morals were endorsed more strongly than harm/care and fairness/reciprocity morals, in the ingroup-violence (U.S.) as compared to the outgroup-violence (Australia) condition. In Study 2, both ingroup/loyalty and authority/respect principles were likewise more accessible than harm/care and fairness/reciprocity principles. in the ingroup compared to the outgroup violence condition. People shifted their moral concerns from harm and fairness to ingroup and authority – but only after hearing about ingroup-committed violence.

Compared to demonization, morality shifting is more defensive in effect, seeking the safety of the ingroup rather than an aggressive moral crusade – though often, of course, the best defense can also be argued to be a good offense. A moral shift towards group-focused ethics can also facilitate the mistreatment of outgroup members, lowering the chance that such violations of more universalistic morals will be seen as a problem. In this connection, morality shifting, like demonization, allows

people to make a virtue of evil (see Reicher, S. A. Haslam, & Rath, 2008). Once the shift enables violence, future violence will be interpreted from the new moral perspective. Along with de-sensitization and habituation, morality shifting may be an important mechanism to indoctrinate those who are to commit violence against outgroup members.

Morality shifting might also have legal consequences for those who commit violence. In the modern world, often the ingroup itself investigates and prosecutes atrocities committed by its members. Not only might the perpetrators claim explicitly that they acted in defence of the group and authority, but the very act of questioning ingroup members, in particular those in the military, would be seen as disloyal and disrespectful. This in turn would lead to lighter or even no punishment.

It is in this context that the shades of “martyrs” and victims of the struggle are called up by extremist rhetoric (Fields & Owens, 2004), adding the force of harm and reciprocity to the group-centered argument . Only violent action, so the argument goes, can prevent further harm. Only the continuation of conflict can pay back the ultimate sacrifice made by martyrs. However, it should be noted that these invocations of harm and reciprocity ethics rest on the valuing of ingroup lives over outgroup lives. Only protecting fellow group members and respecting their sacrifice is virtuous; not so, protecting the enemy or honouring their deaths.

#### *Morality, Moralization, and Certainty*

Not everyone would characterize ingroup-favoring values as “morality.” As we have seen, many psychological studies morality have focused on harm and reciprocity principles. While these are universally highly valued across cultures (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001), other codes of morality are more culture-specific. For

example, purity, ingroup/loyalty and authority/respect themes tend to be valued more highly by conservatives than by liberals in the US (Graham, Haidt & Nosek, 2009), by working-class adults as opposed to university students in the US, and by non-Western populations in general (e.g., US or Britain vs. Brazil; Guerra & Giner-Sorolla, 2010; Haidt, Koller & Dias, 1993). While loyalty and purity concerns are seen as moral by cultures that value them, they are seen as only social conventions by cultures that do not.

We think that there is a way to recognize diverse opinions on moral principles, while making a principled distinction between more and less acceptable uses of morality. Baron (2003) distinguishes between true morality, which applies to others' behavior in a way that serves the goals of all people, and moralization, which a person applies to others' behavior in a way that serves his or her own goals. Moralization often appears as a parochial standard, restricting one group of people more than another. Importantly, what sets moralization apart from true morality is not the content of the rules, but the scope of their application. Although moralizers may claim they are being "fair and balanced" – how could they do otherwise and still claim morality? – their judgments reveal one law for "me" or "us" and another law for "them."

At first, loyalty to one's ingroup and obedience to authority seem intrinsically prone to moralization, because they refer to specific ingroups that people belong to. But surely, it is possible to treat respect for one's country as a universal moral rule. To do this, I don't have to glorify my own country as a world leader whom everyone is bound to respect. Instead I can support the ingroup principle disinterestedly, making the universal claim that everyone should be loyal to their own people and respect their own leaders and national symbols. This is a more truly moral position; it represents a

wish for people's actions to serve their own goals. Likewise, people are also able to apply even the universal principles of harm and fairness in a parochial way, seeing harm as more harmful and injustice as more unjust when it affects the ingroup, and seeing the same acts as positively moral when they affect a demonized group.

It is the certainty provided by parochial moralization, more than the exact moral principle being advanced, that explains the allure of extremist explanations. Applying moral principles equally to yourself and to everyone else, as true morality demands, raises doubts. You have to think about good people who may do bad things, or good things that are done for bad reasons. Moralization, though, creates a certain world of black and white that privileges the self and its identities. This is true whether moralization consists of seeing members of other groups as less worthy of moral concern, through dehumanization; seeing them as more worthy of moral censure, through demonization; or seeing their rights as incidental to the justified defense of your group, through morality shifting. All of these provide a way out of the cognitive dissonance and discomfort that might arise from believing that one's own group is good, but has done bad things to equally good people.

Maintaining a good image of one's own group is important as a way to achieve certainty, as shown by research linking the need for cognitive closure to numerous indicators of ingroup bias (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006). Research on moral exporting, or the desire to impose moral standards on others, has also shown a link between desire for certainty, as measured by the need for cognitive closure scale, and self-interested moralization (Peterson, Smith, Tannenbaum, & Shaw, 2009). Janoff-Bulman and Sheikh (2009) review survey data showing an increase in moralized attitudes in the United States after the September 11 attacks; people sought a compensatory rise in moral security against a loss of physical

security. It is not hard to imagine that extremist recruits from families, or indeed whole populations, threatened by war or repression might seek out moral certainty by going to any length for their valued group.

Likewise, uncertainty about the morality of our own group is directly painful because it leads to emotions of self-doubt such as anxiety or guilt. Research on reactions to the morally despicable conduct of the ingroup shows both its capacity to arouse guilt and shame, and the extent to which people who identify highly with the group can deny these emotions (Iyer and Leach, 2008, give a review of this literature). In fact, some of our research (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006) shows that the dehumanization of an intentionally harmed enemy arises from the same considerations that give rise to guilt. Aquino and Reed (2007) also found that people in the United States who dehumanized Iraqis more, in the context of the U.S. conduct of the war in Iraq, felt less guilt about the war. However, this relationship did not hold for people with a strong universalistic moral identity – true morality overcoming the defenses of moralization.

Moralization goes beyond making an extremist cause feel certain; it negates social critique of the cause. In time of war, people who try to understand the enemy are suspect. Internal criticism is bad for “morale” – perhaps a telling expression. But the other side itself interprets the uncompromising, violent responses demanded by moralization as evidence of evil. Worse still, the victims of moralized violence are thwarted no matter what response they choose. If they intensify violence themselves, this only makes them appear more evil and forces more intransigent resistance (Abrahms, 2006). But if they extend the olive branch, this is seen as weakness – both from their own side, and from enemy hardliners who see a vindication of violent methods in the surrender. A moralized mandate, unlike a pragmatic one, is impervious

to signs of failure and success alike. In apocalyptic thinking, the worse things get, the closer things are to an ultimate reckoning which will favor the righteous.

Certainly, our discussion has ended up with a bleak image of extremists and their enemies locked in a cycle of mutually justified and moralized violence. Conflicts such as the present “war on (Islamist) terror” or between Israel and the Arab world have been termed “intractable” (Bar-Tal, 1990) because of this pessimistic picture. Such an impasse, it seems, can only end with the destruction of one side or both. But some insights from our perspective might help illuminate solutions, or at least prevent the expenditure of energy on attempts that are doomed to fail.

We find ourselves in agreement with one hawkish assumption – high-minded appeals to universalistic morality, fairness, or freedom are not going to influence extremists at all. This is not, as hawks would have it, because extremists are necessarily evil, primitive, or irrational. Rather, they already believe their acts to be justified by a moralized application of those very same values. They don’t hate freedom; they love it, for themselves, and see themselves as fighting to defend their own rights and those of their whole group. Appeals to be fair and apply the same moral standards to all people don’t work, even with much less passionate issues. A classic experiment by Lord, Lepper & Preston (1984) followed up research showing that opponents and supporters of the death penalty judged evidence in a biased way, trying two ways to eliminate this bias. The ineffective technique asked people just to “be fair” in considering the evidence. The more effective technique asked people actively to take the perspective of an opposing partisan. However, demonization of the enemy may close off even the perspective-taking angle; thinking about the perspective of a mass murderer or child molester seems not only difficult and unusual, but morally contaminating and itself wrong.

Blocked at every turn by moralization, the advocate for reconciliation may realize that moralization is itself the enemy, and look for pragmatic solutions to conflicts that have become evidently mutually destructive. Unfortunately, moralization also strongly resists the framing of a moral question in pragmatic terms, as research on financial valuation of morally valued goods such as human life shows us (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997). Following the logic of morality shifting, however, it may be that pragmatic *group* interest provides a moral way to challenge the narrative of extremism. Moral punishment can at times become too costly, its long-term futility evident. Forgiveness, more than an altruistic act of compassion, can be a self-serving act of survival, to end a cycle of violence and recrimination (e.g., Scobie & Scobie, 1998). If both sides have reached a stable impasse with horrific conflict, then why not have the same impasse without conflict? A change in values, ending in a weary pragmatism, seems the only way out of the moralization trap.

### *Concluding Remarks*

We began with a paradox: if, as science suggests, humans have a built-in aversion to directly killing their own kind, why is there so much violence in the world? One answer might be that the people who carry out violence, through quirks of brain biology, upbringing, adult experience, or social categorization processes have lost their capacity for empathy and for being moral human beings (Castano, in press). This may hold true for some violent perpetrators. However, we should be careful of accepting it as a complete answer, because it feeds into the very biases outlined in this chapter. It is comforting to our own sense of certainty and equanimity, to think that the perpetrators of extremist violence are fundamentally unlike us. Our moral

righteousness and indignation feels so good to us; how can someone who is so bad feel the same things?

As we have argued, a sense of certainty through morality fuels the creation, justification, and support of violent extremist activities. While feelings of moral wrongness from the mere fact of harming another person may be lulled by considering the victims of violence as less than human, we have also identified psychological mechanisms that actively engage the moral sense instead of just disabling it. By demonizing the enemy, the extremist identifies them as inherently malicious agents of harm, justifying unlimited action against them. Doubts about depriving other people of their life and rights can also be calmed through morality shifting, focusing on the morality of this action in different terms entirely – as an act that is virtuous because it is done in the spirit of loyalty and obedience, rather than responding to concerns about harm and reciprocity.

These mechanisms are alike in one important respect. Each of them is applied in a biased way, creating the certainty that comes from moralization, rather than the self-doubt that might come from taking an even-handed, truly moral position. Although group identification is not inherently violent, no more than religious or political belief, it can legitimize and justify violence when it is moralized and used as a means toward an easy sense of certainty. Thus, ironically, the same moral capacity that can underlie acts of great humanity and selflessness also can underlie acts of great cruelty. We must not let our lifelong habit of thinking morality is always a good thing obscure this tragic reality.

One final observation remains. In our field of experimental social psychology, studies of terrorists or people who support them are few. It is far more common to test the more easily approached population of civilian members of those Western states

whose policies are not often characterized as extremist, but who have in the past decade engaged in a series of wars and police actions against extremist groups and associated states. Although our conclusions on this basis may seem to be only a mirror image of actual extremist thought, we actually think that this mirror image is telling, in and of itself. Our perspective explains how even peaceful civilians, believing themselves possessed of a moral sense, can escape revulsion at the negligent killing of thousands of “lesser persons” so that evil can be punished and the homeland kept safe. This violence, in turn, creates extreme uncertainty among its victims, pushing them likewise into an extreme and moralized stance. So much of moralization rests on the casting of the enemy as a being unlike ourselves, that for a time after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and even to some extent today, it was considered unspeakable – literally immoral – in the United States to attribute the attacks to any motive other than sheer evil. That kind of condemnation, however, is closer to the true origins of terrorism than it realizes.

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