Ethical dissonance, justifications, and moral behavior

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*"Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me..."*

Psalms 51 4-5.

This quote from Psalms describes King David's agony over his sin with Bathsheba. Far more than God's forgiveness, King David asks for redemption from the pangs of his own conscience and the constant reminders of his sin.

Of course, unlike King David, most people do not commit adultery and send the betrayed spouse to certain death in the battle-field. Still, research shows that ordinary people who perceive themselves as trustworthy and honest frequently break their own moral code, lie (almost every day) [1], bend rules [2••] and cut corners for profit [3••,4••]. Interestingly, whether transgressions are small or large, people agonize over them [5]. This paper describes the psychological cost of acknowledging one's wrongdoing, and the ways people deal with their scruples to preserve a positive moral image.

Ethical dissonance

Ethical dissonance arises from the inconsistency between the aspiration to uphold a moral self-image and the temptation to profit from unethical behavior. This dissonance is singled out for three reasons. First, ethical dissonance involves the breach of absolute criteria of right and wrong (e.g. the Ten Commandments; Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics). Second, beyond cognitive inconsistency, ethical dissonance poses a larger threat to the

self, by including also the violation of social norms and failed self-integrity [6,7]. Third, people cannot solve this dissonance with a change of attitude, as explicit cutback of moral standards will further threat the self-image [5].

We make a distinction between two types of ethical dissonance: the first type, *Anticipated* dissonance occurs before people commit a moral violation. It arises when people contemplate wrongdoing, and the agitation it elicits serves as a forewarning that aims to help people resist temptation. The second type, *Experienced* dissonance occurs after the fact when people realize their wrongdoing and feel guilt and remorse. The distressing experience prompts people to compensate for the violation and restore their sense of morality.

Reducing anticipated ethical dissonance

When anticipated ethical dissonance arises, people use pre-violation justifications to redefine unethical behaviors as '*non*' violations. Ambiguity and gray areas allow people to blur the difference between right and wrong, and diminish the threat to the moral-self [8••].

Cash substitutions. Taking money from the petty cash is stealing, but what about taking home office supplies? When a six-pack of Coca-Cola was left in a communal refrigerator on a university campus, the cans disappeared within 72 hours, but when plates with six one-dollar bills were left in the refrigerator they remained untouched [3••]. Similarly, when unsupervised participants collected their payment for an experiment from a jar, they took less when the jar was filled with dollar bills and more when the jar was filled with tokens [4••].

Shuffling and stretching the truth. Inventing facts is definitely a lie, but shuffling facts and reporting 'sorta' truth reduces anticipated dissonance. In a die-under-cup game participants rattle a cup, peek through a hole, and report the outcome of the die-roll for payment. When participants rolled the die once they cheated less than when they rolled two extra idle rolls. Why? Because inventing an outcome elicits more tension than reporting an outcome that was actually observed, though on irrelevant rolls [9,10]. Using the same game, participants cheated less when an outcome of '6' earned them the maximal payment and cheated more when the maximal payoff was given to '3'. Why? Because 'stretching' justifies lying about an outcome of '5' in one case but in the other case it justifies lying about both outcomes of '2' and '4' [11]. Demonstrating truth-stretching in another context researchers asked participants to imagine they were selling a car which odometer had been disconnected, and then judge a mileage report of 60K. When participants

were told the true range was 74–76K they estimated 60K as a lie, but when they were told the true range was 60–90K they said 60K was justified (in both cases a fair estimation is 75K) [12]. Stretching the truth in other domains is similar to these examples.

Self-serving altruism. Another way to quiet down anticipated dissonance harnesses altruism to turn wrong behavior into right. White lies provide a simple example. Unlike a lie that benefits only the liar, if a lie benefits another person as well, it can be justified, and redefined as altruistic [13$^{\bullet\bullet}$]. For example, when participants rolled a die to determine their payment, they lied more about the roll outcome when the roll also benefited a passive partner [14]. Altruistic cheating increases as the lie benefits more people [15]. Importantly, as the bonds with the beneficiaries are stronger (e.g. friends, family) the anticipated ethical dissonance dissolves and people experience less guilt [16,17]. Recent evidence indicated that oxytocin facilitates self-serving altruism [18]. This hormone strengthens social-bonding and is also associated with decreases in anxiety and social threat [19].

The Robin Hood logic goes one step further and justifies clear unethical behavior if it hurts the 'strong' to benefit the 'weak'. In a field study researchers examined vehicle emissions testing, and found that inspectors were more likely to pass standard ('poor looking') cars that should have failed the test, but were stricter with regard to luxury vehicles [20].

Licensing. Moral licensing helps people reduce anticipated ethical dissonance in quite a different way. People act as though good deeds earn them moral credit and cancel out future wrongdoing [21,22$^{\bullet}$]. Thus, previous good deeds balance a mental moral sheet and reduce the anticipated threat to the moral-self [23$^{\bullet}$].

Licensing has been documented in a wide variety of domains and for many different behaviors. For example, expressing support for a Black political candidate licensed participants to discriminate against Black people in subsequent hiring decisions [24,25]. People felt similarly licensed if their friends supported a minority group [26], or if they simply had a friend from a minority group [27]. In another domain, choosing to buy green products made participants more likely to engage later in dishonest behavior [21]. Recalling pro-social behavior from their past led people to make lower donations and justify unethical corporate decisions [23$^{\bullet}$]. People felt licensed even when they merely thought about their own morality [28$^{\bullet}$] whether the evidence was weak or strong [29], and even if they merely planned to donate money or blood in the future [30].

Reducing experienced ethical dissonance
When people experience ethical dissonance after their wrongdoing, they use post-violation justifications

to compensate for their guilt and reestablish their moral self [8$^{\bullet\bullet}$].

Cleansing. One way to relieve guilt involves self-punishment and physical pain [31]. Similar to religious rituals (e.g. fasting, abstinence, or flagellation) studies indicate that participants responded to their own moral violation with a tendency to self-inflict pain [32]. In several studies, guilt associated with unethical behavior, led participants to self-inflict more intense electric shocks [33,34] (compared to participants who felt sad or neutral). In another study, guilty participants immersed their hand in ice-water for longer time [35] (compared to a neutral control group). In all cases the experience of pain reduced participants' feeling of guilt [33], and greater pain led to greater emotional relief [34].

A second, easier way to ease the experience of ethical dissonance involves the symbolic act of washing sins away. Again, along the lines of religious rituals (e.g. baptism for repentance) there is evidence for an association between physical cleansing and moral purification [36]. In one study, after participants hand-copied a description of unethical selfish behavior they preferred a gift of an antiseptic wipe over a pencil. Furthermore participants who used the antiseptic wipe to clean their hands experienced fewer moral emotions (such as guilt) than those who did not use the wipe [37$^{\bullet}$].

Confession. Most religions incorporate confession as a way to resolve the experience of ethical dissonance and turn a new leaf. Admitting the misconduct, owning up to the wrongdoing, expressing remorse and asking for forgiveness earn atonement.

Simulating the effect of confession researchers asked one group of participants to recall a moral violation they had committed, close their eyes, and ask God or other higher entity for forgiveness. Testing cheating before and after the simulation showed that confession reduced the level of cheating. Interestingly, merely informing participants they would later simulate confession was enough to reduce dishonest behavior [38$^{\bullet}$]. Sincerity is both the key and the Achilles Heel of confession. Recent work suggests that people sometimes engage in partial confession, where they admit some wrongdoing to restore their sense of morality but hide the full extent of their actions to avoid embarrassment and shame [39].

Distancing. An insincere way to cope with ethical dissonance involves hiding one's own moral violation while pointing to other people's moral failings. In a series of studies, participants recalled a moral violation they could not deny and truly regretted (control conditions included negative events, personal disappointments or neutral events). Only the first group experienced ethical dissonance. To distance themselves from the unresolved

Figure 1
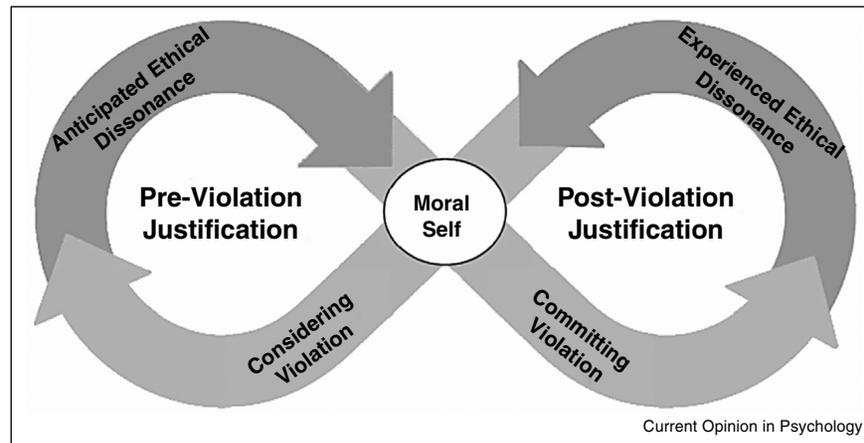
The interplay between ethical dissonance and justifications.

dissonance these participants presented an ultra-honest image, adopted stricter ethical criteria, and judged other people's unethical behavior more harshly [5]. When wrongdoers are identified as out-group members, distancing is emphasized, leading to explicit condemnation [40].

Moral hypocrisy. A cynical post-violation justification allows people to hold two distinct belief systems. In line with Machiavelli's logic in The Prince moral hypocrisy asserts that power and status justify immoral behavior as means to an end or as privilege. A number of studies have shown that once participants were endowed with power in asymmetric situations such as the dictator game or manager-employee simulation, they changed their perceptions of fairness and morality, judged their own violations leniently and judged the violations of others harshly. Interestingly, both transgressors and their victims agreed that power and status trumps morality [41–43].

The promise of ethical dissonance

On a brighter note, ethical dissonance holds a promise. A robust finding indicates that people wish to be moral and consider honesty central to their self-image [44]. Serving as a moral gate-keeper, ethical dissonance harnesses the tension it creates to help people uphold their aspired moral standards. Research has documented effective ways to trigger ethical dissonance as an intervention [45]. For example, recalling the Ten Commandments or signing an honor code made morality salient and eliminated dishonesty [3,4••]. Presenting a picture of eyes above an honor-pay-jar lowered the sense of anonymity and resulted in more payments [46]. Signing one's name at the top of an insurance form (rather than at the bottom) elicited moral commitment and reduced false reports [47•] and forcing delays between choice and implementation encouraged self-reflection and helped people resist temporary temptations [48,49].

Paradoxically, the problem with justifications is that they are highly effective in resolving ethical dissonance. While justifications protect people from psychological tension and secure their self-image they also allow people to behave unethically, making their sense of morality a mirage. Our review portrays a moral pendulum [23•] which allows people to swing back and forth between the guilt associated with unethical temptation and a sense of decency elicited by justifications [50,51]. This special interplay between ethical dissonance and justifications is depicted in Figure 1. People may feel altruistic despite (or even because) they cheated; people may intend to do good and then feel licensed to do bad (whether or not they actually carried out the good deed); people may feel generous after compensating for unethical behavior with a donation; or cover-up a shameful sin by being over righteous. The problem is further complicated as this dynamic process gradually erodes the moral code along a slippery slope [52•,53], numbs people's sensitivity to moral dilemmas, shapes down social norms, and make us less ethical as individuals and society. Given this incredible human ability, fighting dishonesty is certainly more complex, and it must include interventions that make ethical dissonance more difficult to excuse.

We conclude by offering that rather than a threat, we should think of ethical dissonance as a morality's gate-keeper, and attend to its unsettling reminders to help us be better people.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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