"Self-interest, or rather self-love, or egoism, has been more plausibly substituted as the basis of morality."—Thomas Jefferson

Two thousand years ago, in the wake of the unsuccessful Bar Kochbah revolt against the Romans, a debate ensued between the disciples of two Jewish sages, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. The students of Rabbi Akiva, a messianic ultra-nationalist who inspired the revolt against the Romans, interpreted their teacher's position to say that the laws and restrictions of the bible pertain only to fellow Jews and do not apply to interactions with non-Jews. Rabbi Ishmael, a universalist who advocated moderation and dialogue with the Romans, delivered a starkly different message to his disciples and emphasized the "humanness" of all people. He contended that biblical law was intended for all people, and that “thou shalt not kill” applies to Jews and non-Jews alike (Arad, 2010, personal communication).

This ancient debate reflects a conflict between competing conceptions of morality that persists today. To whom should moral consideration be extended? In most intergroup conflicts, each side views its opposition to the other as a morally righteous and religiously sanctioned
response to the evils of the other side. Thus, the moral issues that arise in the context of clashes between groups often hark back to the ancient debate between Rabbis Akiva and Ishmael.

Our discussion is intended to shed light on issues that have been debated by generations of theologians, moral philosophers, and social scientists. Do morals encourage people to transcend egotistical concerns and consider the condition of the "other," or do they serve the opposite function of glorifying one's self-image and group's status under the guise of benevolent concern? Do morals reflect context-dependent and relativistic prescriptions for human behavior or universal rules of human conduct? How can people commit acts, under the guise of moral righteousness, that most post outsiders would view as immoral and even evil? How do the group-level and individual-level functions of moral behavior relate to each other?

In this chapter we focus primarily on the role of moral concerns in intergroup conflicts and the potential of moral principles to both defuse and intensify conflicts between groups. Paradoxically, moral strivings often increase the viciousness of interactions between people with different group identities, partly because of the diverse moral principles cultures use to govern behavior. Although moral principles are typically thought of as promoting more humane and other-oriented behavior (e.g., Aquino et al., 2009), they can also promote the defense of one’s own group, which often includes vanquishing another group, perceived as evil. To shed light on these issues, we use terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997) to explain how moral principles, which promote group cohesion, are used by in the self-regulation of individuals (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1981). We suggest that moral behavior involves implicit calculations aimed at enabling an individual to maintain self-esteem by means of enhancing a moral self-image. This often entails sacrificing one set of moral values for another, which in many cases leads to a ‘righteous’ crusade or jihad against another group.
We begin with an overview of TMT and consider contemporary theories of morality through the lens of this perspective. We then discuss how terror management concerns affect the self-regulatory processes through which people control their own behavior to meet the dictates of their culture. We then describe ongoing research on terror management and morality that examines moral perceptions and judgments in the context of intractable political conflict. In light of this research, we go back to the fundamental question of whether there are universal conceptions of right, wrong, good, and evil, and whether moral concerns can influence the course of violent intractable political conflict.

Terror Management Theory

TMT contends that the uniquely human awareness of the inevitability of personal death generates the potential for overwhelming terror because it frustrates the very basic desire to live. This potential for terror drives people to construct their reality in a way that infuses life with meaning, value, and hope of transcending death. Terror management research has demonstrated that investing in a cultural worldview and defending it against threats is an essential means of defending against existential terror. Cultural worldviews are symbolic, social constructions of reality that (a) imbue life with meaning and order, and answer basic questions about existence; (b) establish standards of value that if met provide a sense of personal self-esteem and group value; and (c) give hope of life continuing after physical death, either literally in the form of an afterlife or symbolically in the form of contributions to something greater and more enduring than the physical self. Thus, to achieve psychological equanimity in the face of mortality, people need to feel that they are valuable contributors to a meaningful and important world as defined by their culture.
Because this protection from existential terror is provided by ideas, concepts, values, and symbols, the existence of others who share one’s worldview lends credibility to it and increases its ability to protect one from anxiety. Problems arise, however, when one encounters people or ideas that threaten the validity of cherished beliefs about oneself and one's group because this undermines the social consensus supporting one’s worldview and self-esteem, thereby reducing their ability to quell anxiety.

To cope with the threat to emotional security posed by groups with different worldviews, people often try to convert others to their worldview (e.g., missionary work) or incorporate the non-threatening aspects of a competing worldview into their own pre-existing worldview (e.g., the recent increase in the popularity of Americanized Middle-Eastern food). Another strategy is to derogate the adherents of competing worldviews (e.g., referring to Islam as an "evil religion") or to employ violent means to defeat or completely annihilate those who pose a significant challenge to one's core beliefs. Although most wars and violent conflicts involve disputes over territory, resources, or other concrete issues, they also invariably involve a clash of worldviews. We argue that protecting oneself from existential fear motivates violent, aggressive responses when worldviews are challenged. Perceiving a severe threat to core beliefs and values often precipitates a lifting of moral prohibitions against killing that exist in the vast majority of cultures.

*Empirical Support for TMT*

To date over 400 studies conducted in diverse cultures in over 21 countries have provided convergent evidence for hypotheses derived from TMT (see Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008, for a comprehensive review). Much of this evidence comes from studies showing
that reminders of death (mortality salience, or MS) cause people to bolster their defenses of their cultural worldview, in an effort to defend self-esteem, and to maintain their close relationships.

Research has also implicated terror management processes in promoting violent solutions to political conflicts. Specifically, MS primes (a) increased support among American conservatives for extreme military interventions in the “war on terror,” including nuclear and chemical weapons that would kill thousands of civilians (Pyszczynski et al., 2006, Study 1); (b) increased support among Iranian students for suicidal terrorism against Western targets (Pyszczynski, et al., 2006, Study 2); (c) increased support among Israelis for a pre-emptive nuclear strike on Iran (Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, & Ein-Dor, 2009); and (d) increased Israelis' support of violent retributions for acts of violence conducted against them, even if the acts of violence were deemed ineffective (Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, & Ein-Dor, 2010). These studies suggest that in times of war and terrorist threat, when death-related concerns are likely to be more prominent than usual, and when hostility toward one’s culture on the part of another group is rampant, people are especially likely to consider violent solutions attractive as means of resolving conflicts.

This research implies that when increased protection from existential fear is needed due to increased salience of death and vulnerability, as is typically the case in times of war and conflict, people will work especially hard to meet the standards prescribed by their cultural worldviews. But cultural worldviews and the standards they prescribe are complex and multi-faceted. According to theories of self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1981), self-regulatory efforts are oriented toward meeting whichever of the many standards a person holds is most salient or accessible at the time. From a terror management perspective, conflict and war highlight the need to defeat an opposing worldview, but also to perceive one's group as having the upper moral
hand. Because violence against another group is often at odds with values of compassion, or with self-perceptions of moral superiority, managing conflicting moral motivations may explain the many paradoxes that violent conflict entails.

Research has demonstrated that even in the context of violent political conflict, highlighting moral values that promote peaceful attitudes such as compassion (Rothschild, Abdolhossein, & Pyszczynski, 2009), shared humanity with others (Pyszczynski et al., 2010), and secular pacifist norms (Jonas et al., 2008, Study 2) can moderate the impact of MS on support for violent solutions to conflict. For example, Pyszczynski et al. (2010) found that inducing Americans, Palestinian citizens of Israel, or Israeli Jews to consider the shared global consequences of climate change reversed the increase in support for violence that MS produced under control conditions, causing MS to increase support for peace, and these effects emerged even at the height of Israeli military action in Gaza in 2009. These findings suggest that in addition to encouraging defense of one’s worldview, which sometimes involves increased hostility toward outgroup members, reminders of death also encourage greater adherence to fundamental cultural values, which in most cases include sanctions against violence and encouragement of compassion for others. Although most people in modern cultures think of violence as immoral and peace-making and compassion as moral, recent theories of moral behavior suggest that both forms of behavior can stem from striving for morality.

Fundamental Foundations of Morality

Moral foundations theory (Haidt & Graham, 2007) identifies five foundational themes that characterize the moral domain: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (for a full description of the five themes see Graham & Haidt, this volume). From this perspective, gut level moral intuitions are the primary cause of
reactions to morally significant persons and situations, and they play an important role in driving more abstract moral reasoning. Haidt and Graham argue that all humans react emotionally, to a greater or lesser extent, to behavior and situations that impinge on all five of these dimensions of morality. They also argue that whereas politically liberal individuals are especially committed to the harm/care and fairness/reciprocity dimension, conservatives are roughly equally committed to all five, which means the place more emphasis than do liberals on ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009).

Looking back at over 25 years of terror management research in light of Haidt and Graham's (2007) conceptualization suggests that moral concerns have been a primary focus of this research and are likely to be important sources of protection from existential anxiety. For instance, in the first TMT study (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon ,1989), municipal court judges who were reminded of their own mortality recommended higher bonds for an alleged prostitute compared to judges in the control condition, especially if the judges were morally opposed to prostitution. This finding indicates that MS increases moral judgments that involve Haidt and Graham's (2007) purity dimension. Research conducted by Goldenberg and her colleagues (e.g., Cox et al., 2007; Goldenberg et al., 2001) indicates that MS increases feelings of disgust towards various bodily functions and sensations – further suggesting that death concerns amplify responses related to the moral purity dimension.

Research pertaining to the fairness dimension of morality has shown that MS increases concerns with fairness (van den Bos & Miedema, 2000), such as greater agreement with hate-crime legislation (Lieberman, Arndt, Personious, & Cook, 2001; Study 1). But other research indicates that MS leads to more blaming of innocent victims (Hirschberger, 2006). Thus, it appears that MS does not necessarily lead people to support the fair treatment of others. Rather,
it increases the motivation to believe in a just world and act in a manner that supports this belief— in some cases showing compassion and in other cases setting it aside (Hirschberger, 2009).

Just as MS does not indiscriminately increase the desire for fairness, it also does not uniformly increase the motivation to care for others. Research indicates that MS increases prosocial responses only toward worldview-relevant causes (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002), and only when the prosocial cause is perceived as non-threatening (Hirschberger, Ein-Dor, & Almakias, 2008). Thus, MS increases other-oriented responses most clearly when they benefit one’s own group, worldview, or self-esteem. When the prosocial cause is non-beneficial or even threatening to oneself, death concerns often induce selfish, ethnocentric, or callous responses to the plight of others (Hirschberger, 2009).

Research also shows that death concerns influence responses to those high and low on social hierarchies corresponding to Haidt and Graham's authority dimension. For example, Landau et al. (2004) found that MS led to increased support for President George W. Bush in the months after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, and Cohen et al. (2004) found that MS increased support for a hypothetical charismatic leader over a merely competent one.

Perhaps the most thoroughly investigated influence of death concerns on morality is in the realm of intergroup relations. Numerous terror management studies have shown that MS increases in-group loyalty and out-group rejection (for a review see Greenberg et al., 2008). Recently, this research has been extended to the study of political conflict and to the morality-laden decisions people make when deciding how to deal with an adversarial group (e.g., Hirschberger & Pyszczynski, in press).
Moral foundations theory seems particularly useful in understanding recent TMT findings related to political conflict, because ethical and moral dilemmas involve conflicts between different specific moral standards to which individuals are committed to varying degrees, and between the welfare of the individual, the in-group, and the out-group (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Because behavior is regulated on an individual level and is motivated by the death anxiety aroused when individuals feel they are falling short of their moral standards, these conflicts are usually resolved by doing whatever is most likely to enable one to view oneself as a moral person. In this sense, moral behavior often appears to be selfish or ethnocentric. This tendency is exacerbated by the importance that cultures and individuals place on morality over other dimensions of personal value (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; Haidt & Kesbir, 2007).

We suggest that moral values are imbued with such extreme significance because, in the vast majority of cultures, they are seen as having been directly delivered to humankind by a deity that can provide or refuse access to literal immortality. Cultures began to link moral behavior to one’s fate after death very early in the history of religion (Wright, 2009). This contingency between moral behavior and one’s fate after death was a powerful inducement to look beyond one’s selfish concerns to the welfare of others, at least others in one’s own group. If the absolute annihilation that death might entail is the ultimate fear, then the promise of continued life after death is the ultimate incentive for behavior that benefits the group. We suspect that the juxtaposition of a supernatural force with concerns about cleanliness, purity, and disgust might have been a human innovation that gained popularity, in part, because of the increased control it gave group leaders over members.

Cleanliness – in all of its meanings – is next to godliness! And human beings want to be as close to the gods as they can get. As Goldenberg et al. (2001) suggested, one of the primary
means through which people deny their mortality is by distancing themselves from other animals, denying their creatureliness, and imbuing their lives with a spiritual dimension. All three major Western religions subscribe to the belief that “God gave man dominion over all things” (Genesis 1:26). By construing human life as rooted in a spiritual realm, people distance themselves from and elevate themselves above everything that dies. A large body of research has documented the role that spiritual longings and distancing oneself from animals play in denying death (for a review, see Goldenberg et al., 2001).

We contend that this concordance of in-group loyalty with maintaining purity plays a significant role in the moral processes that govern intractable intergroup conflicts. In the next section we consider how the regulation of moral behavior can both inflame and defuse such conflicts. We focus especially on the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, which impinges in various ways on the entire world.

Morality in Times of Conflict

Moral issues lie at the heart of virtually all intergroup conflicts. Although selfish and ethnocentric desires for resources, territory, and tangible goods are usually involved, what is typically at stake is who has the right to these things, who deserves them, who has treated whom unfairly, and how the deity wants these resources to be distributed. Given the security that people acquire from viewing themselves as morally righteous, it is no surprise that all sides to conflicts construe themselves as righteously fighting against undeserving, unjust, evil usurpers of their rights, a fight in which the deity and all that is good are invested in their victory.

War and violent conflict diminish a person’s ability to achieve a balance between one’s own interests and the needs of others, because during conflicts the stakes are high and threat looms large. Consequently, the motivation to uphold a moral self sometimes leads people to
construe the conflict in a way that enables them to maintain a moral self-image while engaging in behavior that violates even their most sacred values. Terror-management concerns play a role in the processes of moral amplification, moral disengagement, and the maintenance of moral identity, all of which serve to justify acts of dubious morality.

*Moral Amplification*

Moral amplification refers to "the motivated separation and exaggeration of good and evil in the explanation of behavior" (Haidt & Algoe, 2004, p. 323). In times of war and elevated violence, moral amplification is a powerful justification mechanism, because people are motivated to view conflict as a battle of light against darkness in which they or their group are guardians of the light. This leads them to dismiss complex explanations that include a consideration of the grievances of the other side and to avoid considering ways that their own group may have contributed to the perpetuation of conflict. We contend that this need to perceive the other as the epitome of evil is not driven by an objective appraisal of the facts, but by the existential benefits of ingroup loyalty and purity (Haidt & Graham, 2007).

Research suggests that when death is salient moral amplification increases. First, MS increases the need for a structured, meaningful world and decreases tolerance for ambiguity (Landau, Johns, et al., 2004). These findings suggest that under conditions of MS, people prefer to perceive the world in clear-cut terms, with little ambiguity or complexity. Second, MS is known to increase punishment meted out to legal and moral transgressors (Florian & Mikulincer, 1997; Rosenblatt et al., 1989), and to increase the need to believe in a just world (Hirschberger, 2006). These findings suggest that the perception of a structured and unambiguous world facilitates the exaggeration of differences between good and evil.
Recently, we have collected data directly linking moral amplification to the Middle East conflict. This research indicated that reminders of death and the Holocaust led Israeli Jews to perceive Israeli Arabs as having malevolent intentions toward them and toward the State of Israel (Hirschberger, Canetti, Pyszczynski, Kahn & Gubler, 2010). When death was salient, Israeli Jews simplified the complex identity of Israeli Arabs, who are typically torn between their conflicting identities as Palestinians and Israelis (e.g., Kimhi, Canetti, & Hirschberger, 2009), and preferred to perceive them in simple, clear-cut terms -- as enemies of Israel. This process of moral amplification via social categorization may support discriminatory attitudes toward minority groups.

*Moral Disengagement*

Given the nearly universal moral injunctions against harming others, it may not be enough to amplify and exaggerate moral differences between us and them. Research conducted in the past two decades suggests that an additional mechanism, moral disengagement, often facilitates support for violent conduct. In the words of Albert Bandura “self-sanction plays a central role in the regulation of inhumane conduct … self-sanctions can be disengaged by reconstruing conduct as serving moral purposes, by obscuring personal agency in detrimental activities, by disregarding or misrepresenting the injurious consequences of one’s actions, or by blaming and dehumanizing the victim” (1998, p. 161). All of these activities help to justify transgressions against humane moral values.

Moral disengagement has been studied in the context of war and terrorism and was found to be positively related to support for military attacks against Iraq and Yugoslavia (McAlister, 2001), and to be related to support for harsher punishments for the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks (Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007). In a large, representative US sample studied at
the time of the 9/11 attacks, moral disengagement completely mediated the influence of the September 11 attacks on support for immediate retaliatory strikes (McAlister, Bandura, & Owen, 2006). Based on research showing that reminding Americans of the 9/11 attacks increases the accessibility of death-related thoughts (Landau et al., 2004), McAlister et al.’s findings (2006) can be viewed as a dramatic field demonstration of the influence of death reminders on support for retaliatory violence.

One of the central mechanisms of moral disengagement is dehumanization -- divesting the victim of all human qualities. Research has shown that dehumanization of a target increases aggressiveness towards the target (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001), and that when a group is dehumanized people do not feel obliged to apply moral standards to them (e.g., Bar-Tal, 1990). However, anti-racist norms and self-monitoring are likely to prevent people from endorsing blatant dehumanization. Instead, they are more likely to view victimized others as less than fully human or as infrahuman. Studies of infrahumanization using a subtle task examining the attribution of emotions to in-group and out-group members (Leyens et al., 2000) has shown that reminding people of killings conducted by their group led them to infrahumanize the victimized group (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006).

Infrahumanization serves a central role in the TMT analysis of moral behavior not only because thoughts of death increase the derogation of worldview violators, but also because the need to elevate oneself and one's group above animal creatureliness and to affirm one's unique, non-animalistic humanity serves an important existential function (Goldenberg et al., 2001). In support of the role of these processes in infrahumanization, research has shown that MS increased humanization of the in-group in three studies conducted with people from three different cultures (Vess, Heflick, & Goldenberg, 2008).
In a related vein, a provocative study has recently indicated that the deaths of outgroup members who threaten one’s worldview can serve a terror management function (Hayes, Schimel, & Williams, 2008). In this study, Christian participants read either a worldview-threatening news article about the Muslimization of Nazareth or a non-threatening article. Half of the participants were informed at the end of the article that a large group of Muslims had died in a recent plane crash on their way to Nazareth. Results indicated that reading about the Muslimization of Nazareth increased the accessibility of death-related thoughts and the defense of participants’ Christian worldview. However, these increases were not observed among participants who learned that many Muslims died in a plane crash. This finding suggests that not only does MS facilitate the use of lethal violence against out-group members, as previous dehumanization research had shown, but also that the death of worldview violators can be soothing and reassuring. This disturbing finding may explain the bloodthirsty nature of much violent conflict.

However, there is also a more optimistic side to the TMT-infrahumanization link. Motyl, Hart, and Pyszczynski (2010) recently demonstrated that whereas MS increased support for a pre-emptive strike on Iran among Americans high in religious fundamentalism, when violence was infrahumanized – described as an animalistic behavior that humans share with other animals – MS no longer increased support for violence. Thus, when faced with the association between violence and animality, MS led participants to view violence as repugnant. This finding suggests that the same desire to view oneself as a transcendent spiritual being that sometimes increases violence toward an outgroup can also be used as an antidote to such violence.

If one way to reduce intergroup violence is by infrahumanizing violence, another way might be to humanize an adversarial out-group. A series of studies conducted on Americans,
Israeli Arabs, and Israeli Jews demonstrated that when people are induced to consider the shared humanity between their group and other groups, MS decreases support of violence and increases support for peace and reconciliation between groups (Pyszczynski et al., 2010).

The Paradox of Moral Identity

Recent research documents a variety of ways in which the motivation to maintain a positive moral identity can lead to behavior that is callous or even harmful to others. Moral identity refers to the extent to which moral beliefs and values are either chronically present or contextually activated, and it has been shown to influence moral conduct. Moral identity is generally thought to promote the upholding of moral standards (Blasi, 1984). Consistent with this view, research has indicated that construing one’s moral identity as important results in greater concern for the needs and welfare of others (Aquino & Reed, 2002). It seems that a strong moral identity fosters a more inclusive attitude toward others and extends group boundaries to include people who are typically excluded from one’s in-group (see Haslam, this volume). Because people are motivated to maintain self-consistency (e.g., Blasi, 1984), those with a strong moral identity should be motivated to uphold moral values and behave as moral exemplars in order to maintain a positive self-image (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009). Moreover, when the accessibility of one’s moral identity is enhanced, moral behaviors should be more likely.

Research generally supports this idea and indicates that priming moral identity increases intentions to behave in a prosocial manner (Aquino et al., 2009). In a conceptually similar study, participants seized the opportunity to behave unethically when it was possible, unless they were first asked to read a moral code, which eliminated these effects (Shu et al., 2009). Reading the moral code presumably activated participants’ moral identities, which reduced unethical
behavior. Priming moral identity may also counter the effects of moral disengagement in response to war crimes committed by one’s in-group (Aquino et al., 2007).

However, recent research suggests that it may be premature to conclude that activating a person’s moral identity always increases prosocial behavior. Because behaving ethically enhances moral identity, the motivation to behave ethically following a moral identity boost may actually be diminished because the need to view oneself as a moral person has already been satisfied. In this case a strong sense of moral identity may ironically license unethical attitudes and behaviors (Mazar & Zhong, 2010). Research supports this contention and indicates that after participants acted in a gender-egalitarian manner and validated their moral identity, they subsequently displayed more gender-discriminatory behavior (Monin & Miller, 2001, and Chapter X, this volume). Apparently, behaving morally satisfied moral identity needs and diminished the motivation to continue behaving morally. In another study, reminding people of their humanitarian nature reduced charitable donations (Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009).

Moreover, in a study of environmental values and behaviors (Mazar & Zhang, in press), although mere exposure to “green” (environmentally friendly) products increased prosocial inclinations, purchasing green products had the ironic licensing effect of lowering prosocial behavior and inducing more cheating and stealing. This study revealed an important distinction between activating constructs related to moral issues, which may induce prosocial attitudes and behaviors, and engaging in actual moral behaviors, which may have the ironic effect of licensing subsequent conduct that ignores others’ welfare.

The licensing effect of immoral behavior seems particularly relevant to political conflict because the motivation to justify morally questionable behavior may be elevated. The tendency to morally amplify the righteousness of one’s group and one’s cause in times of conflict is likely
to increase this licensing effect. In a series of studies, we (Hirschberger & Pyszczynski, 2010) examined whether MS had different effects on the moral attitudes of Israeli political hawks and doves with regard to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, and whether moral identity primes would moderate the effect. The research was conducted several months after the outbreak of violence between Israelis and Palestinians in 2009.

In the first study, we assessed the moderating effect of participants’ political orientation on the impact of MS on responses to a particularly salient moral dilemma—justifying civilian casualties. Participants were randomly assigned to an MS or pain-salience condition and read a vignette that described Palestinian civilian casualties during the conflict in Gaza. Results confirmed our expectations that right-wing, hawkish participants would respond to MS with greater justification of civilian casualties, whereas those with a left-wing, dovish orientation exhibited the opposite effect.

In the next study, we examined whether priming moral identity moderates the impact of death reminders on moral attitudes. Because the moral dilemma in question pertained to the conduct of an entire group, and not that of a specific individual, we believed that group moral identity was especially relevant and we therefore primed group moral identity. For similar reasons, we chose to prime a reminder of collective death—the Holocaust instead of one’s own death. Participants were first assigned to read a Talmudic passage that either characterized the Jewish people as a charitable and compassionate nation (moral condition) or a passage warning against displaying too much compassion and advising that showing compassion to the cruel is akin to being cruel to the compassionate (control condition). Then participants were assigned to either a Holocaust salience or a control pain salience condition and completed the measure of justifying civilian casualties that was used in Study 1.
Among participants who were not primed with moral identity, those with a right-wing orientation responded to the Holocaust prime by rating civilian casualties as more justified than those with a left-wing political orientation, replicating the findings of Study 1. However, much to our initial dismay, the moral identity primes increased justification of civilian casualties in the Holocaust salience condition among left-wing participants to the level expressed by right-wing participants. It appears that moral identity primes had a paradoxical effect on the resolution of moral dilemmas by reducing the discrepancy between participants’ desire to view themselves as moral and the morally questionable attitude that Palestinian civilian casualties are acceptable. The fact that this effect was most pronounced among left-wing participants is consistent with other findings from this line of research indicating that such persons generally find civilian casualties less morally acceptable. Thus, when confronted with moral violations by their group, reading Talmudic passages that bolstered their sense of the morality of their group may have ironically facilitated shifting away from their typical moral stance of viewing civilian casualties as wrong.

To clarify the processes involved in this effect, we conducted another study in which we primed moral identity and examined whether moral disengagement would mediate the effects of MS on the justification of civilian casualties during conflict. To extend the generality of our findings to individual moral identity, we used Aquino et al.’s (2007) individual moral identity manipulation. To get a clearer picture of the role of death concerns, we used a standard MS manipulation rather than the manipulation of Holocaust salience, because the latter was likely to arouse a multitude of thoughts and feelings in our Israeli Jewish sample. In addition, we measured two facets of Bandura's (1986) conceptualization of moral disengagement – moral justification and advantageous comparison. The dependent variable was based on the same
questions regarding the justification of civilian casualties used in the previous studies. Results indicated that MS increased moral justification, advantageous comparison, and the justification of civilian casualties, and that this occurred primarily in the moral identity condition – replicating the findings of Study 2. Moreover, the impact of MS on the justification of civilian casualties was significantly mediated by moral justification. These results support our claim that the paradoxical influence of priming moral identity when death is salient involves processes of moral disengagement that facilitate the justification of morally objectionable conduct.

We suspected that one of the reasons that priming moral identity in our studies increased rather than decreased support for indiscriminant violence was that all of our studies referred to violent acts that had already been committed. Moral dilemmas regarding past events may be viewed by participants as counterfactual and as requiring pointless moral agonizing. Because history cannot be changed, people may be motivated to justify past group transgressions, especially when their moral identity has been boosted and their mortality is salient. Thus we conducted a fourth study to determine whether similar facilitation of future violence by boosting one’s moral identity would occur. We replicated the design of Study 3 and added an additional variable: Half of the participants were asked about the 2009 War on Gaza, which took place before the study was conducted, and the other half were asked to imagine a future violent outbreak between Israel and the Palestinians. We also measured feelings of shame and guilt following the reaction to the moral dilemma. We hypothesized that when mortality was salient and moral identity was not primed, left-wing Israelis would experience greater shame and guilt. However, when mortality was salient and moral identity was primed, we expected a reduction in shame and guilt among this group. If this was the case, it would further explain the licensing
effect of priming moral identity by showing that the self-conscious emotions that typically restrain morally questionable behavior are alleviated when moral identity is boosted.

Results in the past-attack (Gaza War) conditions supported our predictions and replicated our previous findings. MS increased justification of civilian casualties among participants who were primed with moral identity. These findings indicate, as others have suggested, that processes of moral disengagement may be invoked retrospectively to justify a prior unethical act (Anand et al., 2005). In the future-scenario condition, there were no significant effects of MS or moral identity primes on support of civilian casualties. This suggests that elevating one’s moral identity is less effective in justifying future indiscriminant violence.

MS and moral identity primes also affected shame and guilt. As expected, MS increased feelings of shame and guilt for past violence when moral identity was not primed. However, moral identity primes reduced feelings of shame and guilt in the MS condition. This shows that moral disengagement facilitates violence by reducing self-conscious emotions reflecting discomfort with one’s own actions or those of one’s in-group. In the future-violence condition we obtained the opposite response, indicating that MS increased feelings of shame when moral identity was primed. This finding is in keeping with past research on moral identity primes (e.g., Aquino et al., 2007) showing that when focused on possible future transgressions, priming moral identity inhibits support for immoral conduct.

According to Bandura (1991), most people develop personal standards of moral behavior that serve a self-regulatory role by promoting good behavior and inhibiting bad behavior. Behaving in ways that counter these standards results in self-censure and guilt feelings. Thus, individuals are likely to behave in ways that are consistent with their internal moral standards. The research described here indicates that past moral violations do not necessarily promote
guilty, remorseful behavior. Sometimes people resolve the disparity between moral values and immoral conduct by rationalizing and justifying past transgressions to reduce the dissonance between values and behaviors.

This attempt to reconcile the discord between moral self-perceptions and immoral conduct by cognitively reconstructing the meaning and severity of the transgression has been labeled moral hypocrisy by Batson and his colleagues (e.g., Batson et al., 2002). Moral hypocrisy occurs when people delude themselves into believing that serving their self-interest does not violate their moral principles. The greater one is self-deceived in believing that one is moral despite behaviors that suggest otherwise, the more one seems sincere to others. Therefore, self-deception in the moral domain is adaptive and enables one to convince oneself and others of one's moral stature. Our findings are congruent with this definition of moral hypocrisy and indicate that moral hypocrisy is primarily observed in relation to past conduct.

**Conclusions**

The ongoing intractable conflict between Israel and the Palestinians concerns territorial disputes, differing historical perspectives, and clashing religious beliefs. We contend that underlying these momentous issues is an existential conflict over truth, identity, belongingness, and moral righteousness. Both Israelis and Palestinians view themselves as sitting on the edge of an existential abyss with no margin for error. Under such circumstances, when basic existence seems to be imperiled, in-group unity and consensus are of utmost importance, dissent is akin to treason, and empathy toward the other side is seen as weakness and cowardice. Morals play an important role in the perpetuation of such conflicts, and in conceptualizing conflict as an epic battle between good and evil. Unfortunately, it seems that to fight and kill fellow human beings it is necessary to abandon the basic morality of civilized life, and this requires profound mental
adjustments. As English poet Wilfred Owen wrote from the trenches of WWI: "Merry it was to laugh there – / Where death becomes absurd and life absurder / For power was on us when we slashed bones bare / Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder."

We have shown in this chapter that existential concerns perpetuate and amplify justification of intergroup violence, but we contend that these same concerns may foster peaceful relations as well. At this moment in history when "the true enemy is war itself" people may realize that peaceful attitudes are consistent with individual self-interest and with the moral values that justify and perpetuate these interests.

References


