

## Moralization and Harmification: The Dyadic Loop Explains How the Innocuous Becomes Harmful and Wrong

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Greek myths tell of the hero Theseus, who sailed to Knossos to face the fearsome Minotaur. The Minotaur lived within a maze, but it was no ordinary maze. Instead, this labyrinth was carefully constructed by King Minos to spiral ever inward, drawing Theseus toward the center, where calamity awaited (see Figure 1). Just as this labyrinth led its victims inexorably toward harm, so too do our minds inexorably transform concepts from harmless to harmful. This expanding psychological concept of harm—elegantly revealed by Nick Haslam (this issue)—is accompanied by the expanding concept of immorality. The simultaneous creep of harm and immorality is no accident but reflects a dynamic feedback loop rooted in our harm-based moral minds. As we see, this feedback loop powers the relentless moralization and harm-ification of many concepts, including abuse, bullying, prejudice, trauma, addiction, mental illness, animal rights, cigarette smoking, and even political correctness.

### Our Harm-Based Moral Minds

Research reveals that moral judgments are rooted in a harm-based template, defined by two perceived minds—an intentional agent and a suffering patient (Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012). This “dyadic” template is common across cultures and explains many quirks of moral cognition, such as why suffering increases a belief in God (Gray & Wegner, 2010), why heroes seems insensitive to pain (Gray & Wegner, 2009), and why harm is the best common currency across all morality (Schein & Gray, 2015). Although past accounts have understood harm as something objective and reasoned (Haidt, 2001), our work suggests that harm is subjective and intuitive—just like the moral judgments it underlies.

This harm-based dyadic template can be summarized by two principles. The first principle is “what seems harmful seems wrong,” explaining why more harmful acts are consistently judged as more immoral. Even acts that seem “objectively” harmless are judged as immoral based on the level of harm

they intuitively generate. This is because even violations of loyalty, authority, and purity can be understood as different flavors of perceived harm—a idea borne out by experimental data (Schein & Gray, 2015).

The second principle of dyadic morality is the complement of the first principle and is “what seems wrong seems harmful.” As people understand that harmful acts are immoral, they automatically infer that immoral acts are harmful. Our research reveals that these inferences of harm are not effortful rationalizations involving metaphoric harm but intuitive perceptions of actual suffering (Gray, Schein, & Ward, 2014). When confronted with examples of bizarre sexual practices, for example, people think that injuries are more painful and that the faces of children are filled with more suffering (Gray, Schein, et al., 2014).

### Dynamic Morality

The two principles of our harm-based moral mind are complementary: The inputs of each principle are the outputs of the other principle, providing the conditions for a positive feedback loop (Gray, Rand, et al., 2014; Schein & Gray, 2014). This feedback loop has the power to amplify the perceived levels of both harm and immorality: what seems harmful seems wrong, and what seems wrong seems *more* harmful, and what seems more harmful becomes *more* wrong, and so on. This dyadic loop therefore serves as a relentless moralizer and harm-ifier, taking issues that are only minimally harmful or immoral and making them seem more severely harmful and immoral.

Consider the example of pornography. Imagine a sheltered person who has just seen her first pornographic magazine. If she gets even an inkling of an intuition of harm, she’ll then see it as somewhat immoral. This initially weak judgment of immorality will then spur on an automatic search for more harm, which in turn will spur on deepening moral judgments. This feedback cycle will continue until finally this person believes that men become addicted to pornography and then “become sexual predators who are unfaithful to their wives and may molest their own daughters to satisfy their sexual desires” (Pierce, 2001). Conversely, if this person doesn’t get the initial inkling of harm, then

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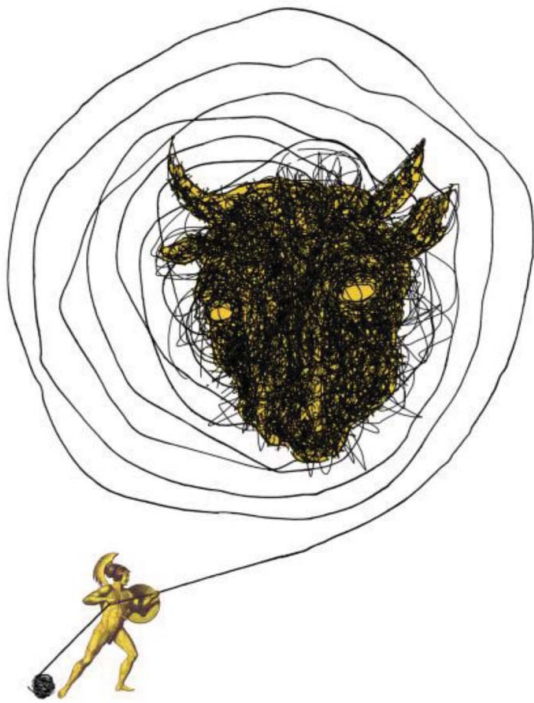


Figure 1. Theseus and the Minotaur. Our moral minds spiral in towards harm and immorality, just as Theseus spiraled in to meet the Minotaur. Art Credit: Susan Sanford; [www.mesart.com/sanford](http://www.mesart.com/sanford). © Susan Sanford. Reproduced by permission of Susan Sanford. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

the feedback cycle will not start; pornography will seem harmless and a mere matter of choice, remaining outside of the moral domain.

The dyadic loops suggest that moral judgments across time—and perceptions of harm—may be best characterized by a spiral, with the dyad lying at its center (Schein & Gray, 2014). Just like the maze of the Minotaur, acts spiral into toward the center and gradually become seen as both more harmful and more immoral. This spiral can serve to amplify not only perceptions of harm and immorality but also moral disagreement.

People generally agree that murder and rape are immoral because these acts seem obviously harmful; they are initially placed deep within the inescapable labyrinth of harm. People often disagree, however, about whether pornography, masturbation, and gay marriage are immoral, because all these acts are ambiguously harmful. Many place them outside the moral domain, but others see them as harmful enough to enter the labyrinth—and once there, the dyadic loop pulls them inward, leading to the polarization of opinions.

### The Inevitable Creep of Harm—and Immorality

The dyadic loop is the key to understanding the creep of harm revealed by Haslam (this issue). Once a concept is seen as somewhat harmful—

once it enters the labyrinth—harm inexorably deepens and expands to related concepts. The dyadic loop also suggests that immorality creeps in proportion to harm, and many examples support this idea. The concept of abuse was historically restricted to physical assault but now includes emotional neglect and verbal insults. Likewise, where once it was acceptable—or commendable<sup>1</sup>—for parents to mete out harsh physical discipline or for fathers to be emotionally removed, both these now seem immoral.

The same simultaneous creep of harm and immorality can be seen in bullying. Bullying was historically restricted to repeated aggression within a power imbalance, but now includes one-time slights, nasty Internet comments, and office politics. Likewise, getting roughed up at school was once seen as part of a natural childhood, but now perpetrating such behavior is grounds for immediate expulsion. Prejudice has also expanded in both harm and immorality, as society sees many subtle behaviors as indicative of harmful prejudice while viewing prejudice as a grave moral offence. We would argue that all these changes in perceived harm and immorality have benefits for society—especially for the disenfranchised—but the point is that both immorality and harm creep.

Definitions of trauma, addiction, and mental disorders also transform to accommodate both a broader notion of harm and immorality. Many see a moral imperative to acknowledge the suffering of trauma victims, the struggle of addiction, and the torment of mental illness. Those who advocate for strict historical definitions of trauma, addiction, and mental disorders are seen to harm victims by failing to legitimize the weight of their experience. Across all these cases, the language of moralization accompanies the language of harm, consistent with the dyadic loop.

### Reversing the Creep of Harm and Immorality

#### Opposing Harm

The cognitive gravity of the dyad suggests that the creep of harm and immorality goes one way: It advances. This idea is consistent with the historic trend of many issues, including the examples covered by Haslam, and also environmentalism, cigarette smoking (Rozin, 1999), and animal rights. Historically, animals were deemed insensitive to pain—and therefore were seen as mere chattel—but now many people see harm in much of animal treatment and moralize it accordingly.

<sup>1</sup>“Spare the rod, spoil the child” was an oft-quoted saying of yesteryear.

Of course, there are counterexamples that suggest a shrinking moral domain, such as allowing people to marry those of different races and the same gender. But upon closer inspection, these evolving issues actually reveal the pull of harm and immorality. Consider the case of gay marriage. What led many to see gay marriage as no longer intrinsically harmful and immoral? The answer is perceived harm—to gay people. In advancing the cause of gay rights, its champions emphasized the suffering of gay people who were denied the chance for equal treatment. The effectiveness of this campaign to associate denial of marriage rights with harm is evident in Justice Kennedy's (Kennedy, Obergefell et al. v. Hodges, Director, Ohio Department of Health, et al., 2015) majority opinion in support of same-sex marriage, where he noted, "The *marriage* laws at issue here . . . *harm* and humiliate the children of *same-sex couples*." This greater harm tipped the scales of justice toward gay marriage.

More broadly, issues may be "de-moralized and de-harmified" by emphasizing an opposing and more powerful understanding of harm and immorality. Tobacco companies continually try to use harm creep in their own interest, framing smoking bans as infringement upon individual rights—and therefore representing the destruction of self-determination (Dye, 2015). However, once it was revealed that these companies suppressed knowledge that smoking caused cancer (United States of America v. Philip Morris USA, Inc., 2006)—sometimes in children via secondhand smoke—these companies started to face a strong opposition from harm creep in the opposite direction. Impinging upon self-determination is harmful and immoral, but knowingly killing kids is *more* harmful and *more* immoral.

Another (meta-)example can be found in the discussions about the implications of harm's creep. Although Haslam (this issue) remains carefully neutral, critics of political correctness see the expansion of harm as deplorable because it suppresses individual freedoms and breeds weakness. They have argued that seeing trauma in the exploration of sensitive topics at college (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015), seeing prejudice in humor (Flanagan, 2015), and seeing discrimination in the expression of personal opinions (Mackey, 2014) all have potentially chilling effects on free speech. There may be truth to these claims, but what is notable—and ironic—is that they argue against the creep of harm by *encouraging* an opposing creep of harm. Critics of political correctness see the growing sensitivity to diversity as victimizing the majority culture and harming the status of White men.

Opponents of political correctness push harm—and immorality—into areas previously seen as harmless. Historically, infringements of free speech meant

having to endure obviously harmful jail time or police brutality for political activism. But those arguing against harm's creep now see free speech suppression when people endure backlash on social media from offensive jokes. Keeping such jokes to yourself was once seen as merely good manners, but now it is seen by some as harmful injustice that leads to the weakening of the nation and its coddled youth (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).

### Discarding Worldviews

In addition to identifying opposing sources of harm, the other route to de-moralization is by rejecting entire worldviews. This is best exemplified by the secularization of modern culture. Acts such as masturbation and homosexuality were seen as both immoral and harmful because they tarnished one's immortal soul and invited God's wrath (Kellogg, 1890). However, if one denies the very existence of God and the soul, then one denies the legitimacy of this entire genre of harm. This explains why Europe seems so morally permissible compared to other more religious cultures—its secularization has removed entire domains of harm.

### Conclusion

Whether the creep of harm is right or wrong, we suggest that it creeps *because* of wrongness. The structure of our moral mind binds together harm and immorality so tightly that they spark a positive feedback cycle—the dyadic loop. This loop leads issues to seem more harmful, and then more immoral, and then more harmful, and then more immoral. It is the reason that the creep of harm is robustly accompanied by the creep of immorality, and why moral debates are fought by encouraging harm to creep one way or another. The dyadic loop helps explain why moralization and harmification are relentless, and often only derailed when entire worldviews are discarded. Within each of our minds lies a moral labyrinth, waiting to pull in issues towards its center of harm.

### Note

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