Moral Memories and the Belief in the Good Self

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Abstract

Most people believe they are morally good, and this belief plays an integral role in constructions of personal identity. Yet people commit moral transgressions with surprising frequency in everyday life. In this article, we characterize two mechanisms involving autobiographical memory that are utilized to foster a belief in a morally good self in the present—despite frequent and repeated immoral behavior. First, there is a tendency for people to willfully and actively forget details about their own moral transgressions but not about their own morally praiseworthy deeds. Second, when past moral transgressions are not forgotten, people strategically compare their more recent unethical behaviors with their more distant unethical behaviors to foster a perception of personal moral improvement over time. This, in turn, helps to portray the current self favorably. These two complementary mechanisms help to explain pervasive inconsistencies between people's personal beliefs about their own moral goodness and the frequency with which they behave immorally.

Particularly egregious ethical violations frequently make national and international headlines. Although less serious moral transgressions are rarely newsworthy, people do lie, cheat, steal, harm, and treat others unfairly with surprising frequency in everyday life (Hofmann, Wisneski, Brandt, & Skitka, 2014). Unethical behavior is rather common, but most people believe that they are morally good (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Almost everyone cares deeply about possessing positive moral traits and qualities, and most people believe that positive moral traits and qualities play an integral role in defining who they are and who they wish to be (Aquino & Reed, 2002; De Freitas et al., 2018; Strohminger, Knobe, & Newman, 2017). Prentice and colleagues (2019) have even suggested that people need to experience being morally good and that satisfying this moral need predicts positive psychological outcomes (e.g., well-being, flourishing).

How is it, then, that most people care deeply about being morally good and have convinced themselves that they truly are morally good, all while committing moral transgressions frequently and repeatedly? We argue that distinct but complementary mechanisms involving autobiographical memory help people to maintain their belief

that they are morally good and that they possess positive moral traits and qualities. Autobiographical memory refers to a complex set of mental processes that involve recollecting events and experiences from our personal pasts (Rubin, 1986), the information about which is often of critical importance "to one's sense of self and one's life history" (Marsh & Roediger, 2013, p. 483). We argue that investigating autobiographical memories of ethical and unethical behaviors committed by ourselves and others is necessary for obtaining a complete picture of how people come to believe they are morally good and for understanding why people so frequently and repeatedly act unethically.

The process of remembering past events is rarely (if ever) unbiased or objective, and once particular events are recalled, they are unlikely to be literal records of what transpired. Although our memories are not completely

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disconnected from reality, they are still malleable, error prone, and often influenced by our biases and motivations (Bartlett, 1932; Conway, 2005; De Brigard, 2014; Schacter, 1999). A considerable body of research suggests that errors, biases, and motivations involving autobiographical memory help to build up positive self-views (self-enhancement) and to avoid negative self-views (self-protection; Alicke & Sedikides, 2011; Green, Sedikides, Van Tongeren, Behler, & Barber, 2019). Thus, memory retrieval and event reconstruction might be used in advantageous ways to create a morally good sense of self in the present. Personal past events can also be woven into a life story in a way that helps to maintain a favorable view of the current self: Our past failures, improprieties, and shortcomings can be attributed to a distant, dissimilar past self who has changed considerably over time for the better (Ross & Wilson, 2002; Stanley, Henne, & De Brigard, 2019; Stanley, Henne, Iyengar, Sinnott-Armstrong, & De Brigard, 2017; Wilson & Ross, 2003). As such, several different autobiographical-memory-related strategies may be employed to achieve the same ultimate goal: a morally good sense of self in the present.

In what follows, we characterize two distinct ways in which mechanisms involving autobiographical memory help to foster the belief that we are morally good. First, people have a propensity to willfully and actively forget details about their own moral transgressions but not about their own morally praiseworthy deeds. This helps to enhance a moral sense of self. Second, given that it is not always possible to forget one's own moral transgressions, people selectively and strategically compare their more recent unethical behaviors with their more distant unethical behaviors to perceive personal moral improvement over time. In this way, they can distance themselves from their past improprieties while constructing a morally good sense of self in the present.

Motivated Forgetting of Immoral Behaviors

Although much of contemporary cognitive psychology of memory has focused on passive factors that make people forget (Baddeley, 1997), a growing body of research has identified more active, adaptive, and motivated factors underlying forgetting (Anderson & Hanslmayr, 2014). Certainly there are some events that we would simply like to forget, and an inability to do so underlies negative clinical disorders such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Anderson & Huddleston, 2012).

Recent evidence suggests that people might actively forget details about their own unethical behaviors to alleviate negative affect while concomitantly fostering

a morally good self-view. For example, Shu, Gino, and Bazerman (2011) found that, after reading an honor code meant to bring awareness of honesty standards, participants who then cheated on a task to earn more money strategically forgot certain details of the honor code (Shu et al., 2011). Complementary findings have been reported in the consumer-decision-making literature: Reczek, Irwin, Zane, and Ehrich (2018) found that when consumers considered whether to purchase certain products, they were more likely to forget unethical product information (e.g., that the product was made by child labor) relative to other kinds of information about the products. Forgetting this unethical information is thought to alleviate negative affect and distress that the consumer might have otherwise experienced when purchasing the product. Additionally, people not only forget their own immoral behaviors in order to maintain a morally good self-view but also forget details about the unjust and unfair behaviors of others when those behaviors benefit the self (Bell, Schain, & Echterhoff, 2014). Believing that we have knowingly benefited from the unfairness and injustice of others without intervening may challenge the belief that we are morally good. Moreover, not only the accuracy but also the phenomenology of our remembered immoral behaviors seem to be subject to selective and strategic obfuscation, as our unethical behaviors are remembered less clearly and less vividly than our ethical deeds (Kappes & Crockett, 2016; Kouchaki & Gino, 2016; see also Stanley, Yang, & De Brigard, 2018).

People not only forget details of past events that challenge a morally good sense of self, but they also forget negative interpersonal feedback that threatens a morally good sense of self (Green & Sedikides, 2004; Green, Sedikides, & Gregg, 2008; Sedikides & Green, 2000). For example, when a person is presented with self-threatening feedback implying that he or she is unkind or untrustworthy (e.g., "You would make fun of others because of their looks"; "You would borrow other people's belongings without their knowledge"), that feedback is likely to be processed shallowly, reactivated rarely, and not elaborated on. As a result, this negative, self-threatening feedback is more likely to be forgotten. However, if someone were to present the person with positive, self-affirming feedback implying that he or she is kind and trustworthy, then this information is more likely to be processed deeply, reactivated frequently, elaborated on, and integrated with relevant episodic self-knowledge. As a result, this positive, self-affirming feedback is more likely to be remembered. This process of forgetting negative, self-threatening feedback is strategic. Individuals do not forget all negative self-referent feedback. Instead, the most threatening feedback

assailing those particular traits and qualities of utmost importance is most likely to be forgotten (Green & Sedikides, 2004).

Perceptions of Moral Improvement Over Time

There is a pervasive tendency for people to compare their current selves with their past selves, perhaps even more often than they compare themselves with other people (Ryff, 1991; Wilson & Ross, 2000, 2003). People strategically compare their current selves with their past selves for the purpose of fostering a belief in positive change over time, which helps to create a favorable view of the current self (Demiray & Janssen, 2015; Ryff, 1991; Wilson & Ross, 2001, 2003). For example, Wilson and Ross (2000) manipulated the objectives of participants when instructing them to describe themselves. Participants instructed to evaluate themselves favorably were more likely to describe inferior past selves than were participants encouraged to evaluate themselves accurately. In another study, Ross and Wilson (2002) found that participants felt more psychologically distant from past negative experiences but felt psychologically nearer to past positive experiences. In addition, participants reported having more positive current self-views when they were encouraged to feel subjectively distant from former disappointments and subjectively close to former successes.

However, people are not equally motivated to perceive personal improvement on all skills, abilities, and qualities. Presumably, there should be a stronger motivation to perceive improvement over time on matters of personal importance. We might expect, then, that perceptions of moral improvement over time are particularly pronounced and pervasive. Past moral transgressions perpetrated by distant past selves might come to represent turning points or indications of self-improvement within a life story constructed by the rememberer. This represents another alternative strategy for constructing a morally good sense of self without having to forget past events, event details, or other information. Our past improprieties can strategically be used to define who we are or who we wish to be in positive terms.

Indirectly supporting this contention, Escobedo and Adolphs (2010) identified a bias in the emotional content of remembered moral and immoral behaviors committed by the self: Remembered behaviors that occurred in the recent past (e.g., within the past year) tended to be evaluated less negatively than remembered behaviors that occurred in the more distant past (e.g., 20 years ago). More directly, Stanley et al. (2017) found that participants judged their own moral transgressions

involving harm and dishonesty in the distant past to be more negative and more severely morally wrong than their more recent transgressions, but there was no relationship between calendar time and the judged severity of moral transgressions committed by other people. The fact that this effect was obtained for remembered transgressions committed by the self but not for transgressions committed by others suggests that the phenomenon serves a self-related motive. People seem to advantageously utilize time in a way that selectively links together different past events within a life story; in this way, they buttress a belief in their own personal moral improvement over time. Doing so may help them to dismiss or explain away their more serious past moral transgressions (e.g., "My most serious transgressions were committed by a dissimilar self, and I do not behave like that anymore") and to portray the current self favorably.

Although objective temporal distance serves as a useful proxy for psychological or subjective distance (i.e., the impression of how distant or dissimilar an individual currently is to a past self), theorists have argued that the subjective distance between past experiences and the present, as opposed to objective temporal distance, predominantly drives self-enhancement and self-protection functions (Wilson & Ross, 2003). When remembering certain events, people feel detached from and dissimilar to some former selves, and they feel close to and similar to other past selves when remembering other events. Although objective and subjective temporal distance are undoubtedly related, such that more distant selves from the objective temporal past tend to feel more subjectively distant, these two constructs do not perfectly track each other (Wilson & Ross, 2003). Sometimes, we may feel subjectively close to objectively distant past selves, just as we may feel subjectively distant from objectively near past selves. And objective temporal distance and subjective distance may be more likely to diverge when individuals are more motivated to portray the current self positively on some trait or quality.

This raises a question: Does the judged morality of our own remembered behavior similarly differ as a function of our perceived, subjective temporal distance from past selves? Recent evidence has consistently supported the conclusion that the judged moral wrongness of diverse kinds of moral transgressions does indeed differ as a function of the perceived, subjective distance from past selves. Stanley et al. (2017) cued participants to provide memories of past actions performed (a) when they believed that they were very dissimilar to who they were in the present or (b) when they believed they were very similar to (or the same as) who they were in the present. When participants were cued to remember events during which they believed they were

very different people, they judged their moral transgressions involving harm and dishonesty to be more negative and more morally wrong relative to remembered transgressions involving harm and dishonesty during which they believed they were very similar to or the same as they were in the present.

In a complementary series of experiments, Stanley et al. (2019) cued participants to remember morally right and wrong behaviors that occurred within the past 10 years. Participants perceived similarity in the self when reflecting on their own past morally praiseworthy actions, and they perceived meaningful change or transformation in the self when reflecting on their own past immoral actions. Not only did these effects consistently hold for diverse domains of morality (e.g., harm, disloyalty, unfairness), but these effects also persisted after accounting for when the events actually occurred in the past (i.e., objective calendar time). So, even when objective calendar time cannot be used to buttress a morally good sense of self, subjective impressions of similarity and change can still be used to create a morally good view of the current self. Supporting a motivational explanation, Stanley et al. (2019) consistently found effects of recalling morally right versus morally wrong actions on judgments of similarity and change over time when those past actions were committed by the participants themselves; however, there were no significant effects when participants recalled morally right and wrong actions committed by other people.

A related line of research suggests that people judge others to be fundamentally morally good, just as we judge our own selves to be fundamentally morally good (De Freitas & Cikara, 2018; Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2014; Strohminger et al., 2017). Moreover, when others improve morally, we judge them to have become more "themselves" relative to when they change for the worse. This does not, however, entail that we actually perceive other people in our lives to be improving morally or that we have a motivation to perceive moral improvement in others. Nor does this entail that people remember, reconstruct, or interpret the significance of past events to perceive other people as improving morally over time (Stanley et al., 2019; Stanley et al., 2017). We believe that an interesting avenue for future research consists in investigating the particular circumstances under which people judge others to be improving morally and the role of autobiographical memory in those judgments.

Conclusions

Almost everyone believes they are morally good, and for most people, positive moral traits and qualities play an integral role in defining who they believe themselves

to be in the present (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Strohminger et al., 2017). Nevertheless, people tend to commit moral transgressions with surprising frequency. To begin to reconcile this apparent divergence between belief and behavior, we have argued that at least two unique but complementary strategies involving autobiographical memory help people to maintain the belief that they are morally good (even if they frequently and repeatedly behaving immorally). Yet people likely implement a host of other strategies to satisfy a motivation to be perceived as morally good; these strategies likely play a significant role in moral judgment and decision making in everyday life. Future research identifying other possible strategies for maintaining a morally good sense of self will prove valuable from both basic and applied perspectives.

Recommended Reading

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Wilson, A., & Ross, M. (2003). (See References). A useful and accessible theoretical account of the relationships among memory, time, and personal identity.

Action Editor

Randall W. Engle served as action editor for this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

Funding

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