

As an initial test of this hypothesis, we asked an online sample in the United States (MTurk;  $n = 98$ ; 66% male; mean age = 33 years) to rate the degree to which 20 “impure” traits (including promiscuity, masturbation, laziness, and drinking alcohol): (1) indicate a lack of self-control; (2) are sexually unattractive; and (3) are morally bad (1–100). We regressed “moral badness” onto “lack of self-control” and “sexual unattractiveness” using a mixed model, with traits nested within participants. (All materials, data and analysis are available on OSF: <https://osf.io/g52w6/>.)

Both “lack of self-control” ( $\beta = 0.26$ ) and “sexual unattractiveness” ( $\beta = 0.25$ ) predicted the “moral badness” of the traits (marginal  $R^2 = 0.24$ ). The two predictors together explained more variance in moral badness than either do alone.

These results support the *self-control* theory; and they also support the *conflict-resolution* theory. They show that a *broader* cooperative theory of morality can better explain why traits are moralised. Future research should develop and test predictions from all available theories of cooperation when attempting to explain moral psychology. Advancing in this way, cooperation may provide a comprehensive explanation of moral phenomena, including those previously labelled “purity.”

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## Moralistic punishment is not for cooperation

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### Abstract

The theory proposed by Fitouchi et al. misses the core of puritanical morality: Cruel punishment for harmless actions. Punishment is mutually harmful, unlike cooperation which is mutually beneficial. Theories of moral judgment should not obscure this fundamental distinction.

One pleasant Sunday, you gather firewood in the morning, discuss whether God exists over lunch, and later, under the stars, share a romantic kiss with your spouse in public. When word of these misdeeds gets out, the Puritans bind your hands and feet, walk you to the gallows, and put a noose over your head in front of a crowd. Then they whip you until your flesh is torn and bleeding. Then they bring a hot iron to bore a hole in your tongue.

Under Puritan rule in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, you committed several crimes and received an ordinary punishment (Merrill, 1945). But why do these tormentors punish harmless actions so cruelly?

According to Fitouchi et al., your tormentors want to cooperate. The authors propose that “puritanical morality is no exception to the cooperative function of moral cognition.” Burning a hole in your tongue is a Puritan’s way of saying they want to cooperate with you. The hot iron is meant to help you control yourself, particularly in obedience to Puritan rules.

We do not think the authors’ explanation works. We accept their first point that cooperation requires self-control. So do many other social behaviors, including obedience to authority, loyalty to coalitions, stealth warfare – even skillful lying, theft, and murder. Cooperation is not special but it depends on self-control too.

We partly accept their second point that puritan offenses show impulsiveness. Some do and some do not. Drugs obviously impair self-control and cooperation. On the other hand, actions such as masturbation and oral sex could be impulsive or deliberate, and might appear impulsive only to those who moralize them. Homosexuality seems unconnected to self-control, yet it is a frequent target of puritanical wrath. Using contraception is rather controlled and yet still condemned by sexual puritans like the Catholic Church. Other offenses such as blasphemy, atheism, and gathering wood on Sunday are more remote yet from self-control.

However, the authors’ theory does not explain the core of puritanical morality – punishment. Despite the reference to “disciplining” in the title, they barely discuss punishment, using the words *punish* and *punishment* only three times in the article. The authors’ main points, cooperation and self-control, do not

explain why puritans want to punish impulsive people, or why they inflict severe punishment for harmless impulsivities.

The authors' argument could explain how people choose partners for cooperation, but that is not the same as choosing people to punish. A person who chooses a cooperative partner with self-control gains a straightforward benefit – better cooperation that yields more rewards. In contrast, a person who punishes an impulsive glutton suffers a cost – the cost of inflicting the punishment, as well as the risk of retaliation from the glutton and their allies. How does a person benefit by punishing, at a cost to themselves, others with low self-control? Perhaps the punisher aims to discipline the offender for cooperation, but why not simply look for a better partner instead of risking retaliation to try to teach a glutton self-control?

As in our opening example, the historical Puritans are known not only for self-control but also for cruel punishment, which they often inflicted on political and religious rivals like the Quakers. Their moralistic destruction is epitomized by the Salem witch trials in which 19 people were hung for witchcraft. For decades before, the Puritans infamously expressed their moral values with the whip, the noose, the pillory, the branding iron, and the mutilation of tongues and ears. This brutality is an element of puritanical morality found in societies around the world. Yet the authors do not say how their theory explains sadistic punishment of harmless offenses.

Additionally, a theory of puritanical morality should explain why people judge certain behaviors but not others as morally wrong (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009). The authors claim that “people intuitively perceive this self-control-requirement of cooperation” (p. 17). If moral taboos come from innate intuitions about self-control, then people should agree on what is immoral across individuals and societies. However, moral rules vary tremendously across societies, and people also bitterly disagree within each society (Haidt, 2012; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993; Pew Research Center, 2013; Weeden & Kurzban, 2014). For example, if humans intuit that an unveiled woman threatens cooperation, why do many societies think it is acceptable to be unveiled? And what explains disagreements such as recent protests against mandatory veils in Iran? Despite being instructed – brutally – on the virtues of veils, immense crowds of Iranians fight for the freedom to be unveiled.

Another theory better explains puritanical rules: Moral judgment is designed for choosing sides in conflicts, while coordinating with other bystanders who choose sides by the same moral rules (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013). To coordinate side-taking, humans can moralize essentially any category of behavior, nearly any verb can be moralized. People moralize actions that frequently occur in conflicts, providing a set of rules for choosing sides when conflicts arise.

Because moral judgment is not designed for cooperation, moral rules can inhibit cooperation and cause harm and destruction. Puritanical rules do not require a special explanation, therefore. Humans fight over the puritan issues of sex, food, drugs, and work, so they moralize actions that occur in these fights. Moral rules differ across societies for the same reason that traffic rules differ: Many codes can serve the purpose of coordination.

Still, moral rules have consistent patterns. Prohibitions against murder and theft benefit most people in most societies, so they are consistently favored in debates over the rules. Prohibitions against sexual promiscuity and disobedience to authority benefit some people while harming others, causing recurrent disagreements and a patchwork of moral variation depending on which faction

wins control of the rules governing each issue – sex outside of marriage, abortion, homosexuality, veils, drugs, free speech, blasphemy, and so on (Kurzban, Dukes, & Weeden, 2010; Weeden & Kurzban, 2014).

In short, although people might benefit from avoiding impulsive partners, this benefit does not constitute a foundation of moral judgment, which is designed for coordination in conflicts rather than cooperation.



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## Purity is still a problem

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### Abstract

Our recent review demonstrates that “purity” is a messy construct with at least nine popular scientific understandings. Cultural beliefs about self-control help unify some of these understandings, but much messiness remains. The harm-centric theory of dyadic morality suggests that purity violations can be comprehensively understood as *abstract harms*, acts perceived by some people (and not others) to indirectly cause suffering.

Purity is a popular topic in moral psychology. One popular theory argues that purity represents a unique moral “foundation” – a distinct domain of moral judgment – that explains why liberals and conservatives disagree about politics (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt, 2007). This theory suggests conservatives but not liberals care about violations of purity, clarifying why conservatives